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STALLION

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OTHER NOVELS BY
MARGUERITE STEEN

THE GILT CAGE
DUEL IN THE DARK
THE RELUCTANT MADONNA
THEY THAT GO DOWN
WHEN THE WIND BLOWS
UNICORN
THE WISE AND THE FOOLISH VIRGINS



PLAYS
OAKFIELD PLAYS

S T A L L I O N

A NOVEL

by

MARGUERITE STEEN

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NOTE : *The characters, places and incidents in this book are all imaginary.*

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CHAPTER I

THE LANE flung its irregular loop round the jutting piece of meadow-land that for a couple of centuries had been known as "Three Oaks." The three trees that gave it its name stood together at the farther extremity of the wedge-shaped field ; in summer the cattle gathered under the rich spread of their ancient branches, so deep in umbrage that the unwatered turf about their roots withered away. Now, in the month of May, the promise of future beauty hung about the branches in a thin haze of green that scarcely veiled their grand symmetrical sculpture. Lightning had blazed a scar down the side of one ; the bole of another—so thick as hardly to be spanned by the stretch of three men—was twisted as though it had been the plaything of some titanic tempest ; and the third, which, standing between the two, would seem secure from the whimsies of the elements, sent out its branches with the regularity of umbrella spokes from the trunk.

Each time she passed it, Ursula Devoke paused and thought the same thing : It's rarely you see an oak-tree so shapely. The legend that the country-dweller ceases to be observant of the beauty of the natural forms which to him are a commonplace had no subscriber in Ursula. Her appreciation was less intellectual or emotional than the spontaneous

response of a spirit that has its own kinship with nature : something as primitive and uncultivated as the grass itself. It was as though she got reassurance from the trees—from the picture which the ~~three~~ of them presented : the middle one a little set back from the other two, fastidiously, as though to avoid overcramping, and the others inclined a little outward and away from the middle one, like a half-opened fan. To the middle, the perfect one, her mind applied the pronoun “ he ” : this was the expression of her life’s creed. The side, the blemished, the submissively bending trees, leaning obediently outwards to afford “ him ” the utmost benefits of sun and air, symbolised as inevitably for Ursula the relation of the female to the male. When autumn came, these two, bedraggled, would quickly shed their leaves and display, with meek ignominy, their poor scarred and twisted sides ; while “ he ” would retain his splendour, his cope of gold, almost till the snows fell, and then, like a prince disrobing, would stand, more lovely in his nakedness than in his pomp of leafage. The grandeur of the male, the subservience of the female, was, to Ursula, the motive of the universe ; it was the note to which her life was tuned, the well-spring of her happiness and her grief.

She stood quietly, with her hand on the gate, looking at the three trees. She felt little and faded. The blood which once had raced in her veins to the call of spring was lulled to a quiet beat ; ardour was a memory. She too had become a submissive thing, no longer outwardly responsive to the influences

which quickened her youth—the lovely, trivial things. All those were brushed away, as pollen is swept by the rain from the golden branches of willows ; she had arrived at the bedrock of life, the grave, eternal things, a little soon. She was only just over her fiftieth birthday, although, like ~~many~~ many women of her class, she looked ten years older : and already her youth was a dream, sweet and pleasant to look back upon, but less real than a story in a book.

She lifted her face towards a sky of a blue that rivalled the few pale forget-me-nots that had seeded themselves from the cottage gardens among the weeds of the hedgerows. A few small, rounded clouds poised themselves sedately in motionless groups overhead, as though conscious of the sobriety of earth beneath them : they reminded Ursula of good children in Sunday-school, of the times she had starched and ironed the white frocks of her own brood, and sent them off from the doorstep with halfpence clasped in their small hot hands.

In hollows of the fields which raced away from the low wall towards the rolling line of the hills lay other clouds, their fallen companions : the clouds of damson blossom and blackthorn, which beautified the mild and simple countryside on this day of spring. The beautiful month of May. She felt there ought to be a song about that.

A lark thrilled invisibly above her ; the solitary fountain of its notes, like crystal drops, pierced with silver the rich golden song of the bees. On such a day, she thought, I was married : and the bees

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swarmed. Unconsciously her lips formed themselves into a smile ; a sigh, partly of wistfulness, partly of content, came up softly from her breast. The smile and the sigh chased tiny wrinkles round her eyes and the corners of her mouth. As though she felt ~~there~~ there, she put up her hands and pressed them against her cheeks. How rough the palms were, and horny ; yet the finger-tips had kept their sensitiveness, and could feel the soft broken outlines of her one-time prettiness. I must have been pretty, she thought, wonderingly : else he wouldn't have loved me. Apple-blossom cheeks, now freckled and ruddy ; eyes of a frail northern blue, from which the colour had drained itself away ; and a bunched bud of a mouth, which had somehow straightened itself into a line of patience, but from which time had not stolen the tenderness. A little dumpy woman in a country lane ; who would give her a glance now ? Supposing that one came by, leading a horse, whistling a tune—would he stop to look at Ursula Devoke, when he had the sky's blue and the white of blossom and the three grand trees to draw his attention from her small bundled figure ? Twenty years had passed since Ursula Parsons, in her sprigged print gown and sun-bonnet, had challenged the sky and the blossom, and had won ; and now the days of victory were over, and time had drawn the weapons gently from her hands. No need for these ; the task is done ; but life is kind.

Not that life had been kind always. Looking ahead of her, Ursula saw the farm wagon, draped in black, grinding along the lane, scattering the ducks and

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ducklings from their pond, followed by its sombre escort of men and women. Presently it would drop out of sight, under the brow of the hill ; the horse would feel cautiously, with its great fringed feet, among the shale and pebble, Ulpha would throw his weight backward on the brake, and at least one pair of rough, sinewy hands, protruding naked from the greeny-black of well-worn mourning, would be laid upon that which the wagon carried, so that it should not slip, in unseemly fashion, towards the horse's tail. As the wagon passed down into the hollow, the golden branches of palm would close tenderly above it, scattering their frail golden rain upon its sable load : and Cousin Agnes Pennell would wince, and complain under her breath that her feet were hurting her in her tight town-made shoes.

Ursula had followed several such processions ; each time it seemed to her that a little part of herself was returning to earth, that some living and feeling part of her being was laid away under the roots of grass, that it was she and not the still, narrow thing in the coffin which was bestowed in the dark earthen cleft. She was dead, and waiting for the resurrection : knowing, moreover, the form in which it would come to her. " Poor Ursula—she've lost 'er ba'rn." " Ay, but 'twon't be long afore there's anudder." And she would accept the gift of life with a meek ecstasy ; the God-gift. She would know once more the mystery of annunciation and the richness of the maternal experience. But the depth of her joy lay, not in these, but in the reiteration of her

power as woman, to consummate the male power of her husband : to receive the life-gift at his hands, and to translate it into terms of flesh. And, in addition to this joy, she knew, year by year, during the months before birth, the still and secret passion of a hope, whose yearly disappointment was softened, for her, by the living presence of the babe in her arms.

"I thought you'd have got farther," said a voice querulously. Ursula turned from her contemplation of the trees with an apologetic exclamation half-smothered on her lips, to receive the heavy bundle which was thrust into her arms. Her quiet eyes scanned her daughter's face, which the girl was wiping with a handkerchief. There was nothing to proclaim the relationship between them ; where Ursula was still and placid as a meadow, Mildred was feverish ; she was pretty, in a frail, urban fashion, but dark as midnight against her mother's lightness of colouring. The sweat had driven the powder into the channels at the corners of nose and mouth.

"The bus must have been on time," observed Ursula thoughtfully. "It's not often on time." Her tone conveyed the apology she did not put into words ; hugging the bundle in both her arms, she stood, a quaint figure, considering her daughter. It was wrong of her to have stopped thinking, by the trees ; Mildred had had the bundle to lug all the way up the hill by herself. She looked fagged out. She was much too thin.

"For goodness' sake let's get in out of the sun," Mildred was saying petulantly. "It might be August !

Gracious, mother, you've come out in your apron ! ”

“ I've just been along to Miss Blandford's,” explained Ursula, turning and trotting at her daughter's side. Mildred walked with short, perking steps, like a hen, muttering now and again under her breath when her ankles, ill supported by her thin, high-heeled shoes, rolled over, and made her stumble in the rutted pathway. “ Giving them a tidy-up, as Fenny's at home to-day.”

“ What's wrong with her ? ”

“ She's just not so well,” answered Ursula vaguely.

“ You do spoil Fenny, mother ! ”

“ Nay, I don't think so. She's weaklier than the rest of you. And she's a good girl.” Ursula paused, to shift the parcel under her other arm. “ What have you got here, Mildred ? ”

“ Give it to me,” she snapped, snatching the bundle from her mother. “ It made my arms ache, coming up the hill. It's some boots—bespoke stuff ; Jack thought they might do for Dad.”

“ A present ? ” asked Ursula innocently.

“ I guess our time for giving presents hasn't come yet, mother ! ” Mildred gave a short laugh. “ We hoped he'd buy them.”

“ I don't know as we can afford to buy any boots just now,” said Ursula doubtfully. “ There's been a few extra things to pay for lately——” Her blue eyes, meeting Mildred's, reminded the latter of the four shillings she had borrowed the last time she was at home. She glanced aside, frowning, hoping that Ursula was not going to ask for the money now, and wishing she had remembered not to put on the

new jumper she had bought that morning from a pedlar. Well ! If she had ! She couldn't be expected to go about looking like a scarecrow ; it was bad for business, and that was bad enough already. Reading the crestfallen expression on her daughter's face, Ursula added comfortingly, " Maybe, in a fortnight or so, we could pay for them."

" Expecting to come in for a fortune, mother ? " asked Mildred ironically.

" Don't be imperent." But the corners of Ursula's eyes creased as she gave the time-honoured rebuke. " Father's walking the stallion to-morrow morning ; last year he did finely—folks was generous ; they all like father—and the Pride."

" How long's he going to be away ? " inquired Mildred, turning her head from Ursula.

" Maybe ten days, maybe more ; 'twill depend on the Pride."

" I'd have thought he could have done with a pair of new boots, to go strutting in front of the—of folks with ! "

" Don't you talk that way of your father. He thinks of his business, not of his boots."

" Oh, ay ! " said Mildred, with a fine incredulity.

Ursula bit her lip ; no, she wasn't going to start an argument—which was bound to end in a quarrel—with Mildred, as soon as the girl came home.

" How's the shop ? " she asked, to change the subject.

" All right," answered Mildred defensively ; then the habit of dependence upon her mother asserted itself. " It's rotten, ma ! Jack's had to borrow to

pay this week's rent. That's why," she added cunningly, "we were counting on dad buying these boots, if he could. We'll have to do something, mother! Jack's no good as a cobbler; lots of the folk that started by bringing their boots to us are taking them over to Thatch End now. And Jack's had a quarrel with the new people that have come to the Manor, because they've found out he was charging them more than the Vicarage——"

"'Tis a silly trick that; you shouldn't have let him."

"He doesn't listen to *me*," shrugged Mildred. "Oh, I'm sick and fed up with being married. I'd leave Jack for tuppence——"

"Don't let me hear you say such things, Mildred Devoke! You ought to be ashamed to have them right wicked words in your mouth."

"Oh, it's all very well for you, mother. You've enjoyed being married. It's just suited you down to the ground!"

"Ay? If it's suited me it's because I've suited it. You don't know what you're talking about, my girl, and what's more, you won't, till you've had a baby or two sucking at your breast."

A retort was on Mildred's lips, but as they turned the last loop in the lane, and were in sight of the cluster of cottages that marked this extremity of the village, she caught sight, in their own garden, of a figure, bending over the lavender bushes.

"Is Annie at home?"

"Ay, she's looking forward to seeing you."

"Lost her job?" sneered Mildred.

"No, she's been on holiday, board wages," answered Ursula proudly. "She's going back to-night."

"Well, don't say anything to her about Jack—she's stuck-up enough already. I don't want any of her interference in our affairs." The enmity of the words was not reflected in the gesture with which the two sisters waved to one another; Annie came down to the gate to meet them. She was short and plump, a youthful edition of Ursula, but more bouncing and assertive than Ursula could have been, even in her girlhood. Her eyes were dark, like Mildred's, but her face had the gilded glow of sun-ripened fruit, and some of the pastoral calm of her mother mellowed her lively youth. She was a year or two younger than Mildred, who nodded a nonchalant greeting as she passed through the gate.

"Picking lavender?"

"Ay. It's all right, isn't it, mother? I thought I'd take a bunch back to the old ladies."

"Aren't you selling it?" came Mildred's sharp accusation. A furious anger brought the colour into her face. The lavender was not hers, and meant nothing to her; she was not touched, as Ursula was, by the tender helplessness of the undeveloped shoots, with their stunted mauve blossoms, so unlike the imperial heads of the later crops; but it made her mad to think of Annie carelessly giving away—to folk who could afford to pay for it, too—something that had value in coin. "Aren't you selling it?" she repeated, her voice shrill with anger.

Annie's rich laughter shook its music on the air.

"What should I ask?—a shilling or half a crown for a few sticks of lavender?"

"It's all right, but you'd better spare the rest for the sake of the bushes, put in Ursula.

"You're very free with your talk of shillings and half-crowns!" sneered Mildred.

"Oh, go on with you! You'd split a farthing with a beggar if you could," said Annie easily. Ursula left the two girls to bicker in the garden, and, carrying the parcel, passed on into the cottage. Their eyes met instantly, but furtively, and they spoke in low tones across the lavender bushes.

The enmity between them was only superficial; they had grown up in intimacy from childhood, sharing with the fourth girl, Prue, most of the secrets they reserved from their elder sister, Fenella; but Mildred and Annie were closer to each other than they were to Prue, because only a year separated them, and Prue—now in her first "place" over at Great Beare—was still only fifteen.

They had giggled together in the same bed, over boys, and village scandal, and spicy bits out of the Sunday newspapers: and they had shared the secret of a hiding-place in the thatch, where they kept a collection of paper-backed novels, with titles like *She Loved Too Well*, *Married Without A Ring*, *Mother but not Wife*, which they read on wet days in Dibden's barn. They shared the punishment, when, with the inopportune arrival of the thatchers while they were in school, these treasures were discovered, and made themselves sick eating green apples, to console themselves for the loss of their library.

Within limits they trusted each other : that is to say that, while Mildred would never run the risk of drawing her sister's criticism on her marriage, she was ready enough to confide in her all matters that concerned her person only, and on this day she was too eager for Annie's sympathy and advice to carry on the squabble over the lavender.

"I say, Annie—it's happened."

"What? Oo! It never has!"

"Yes, it has. I'm not crazy, am I?"

"You must have been, if you let that happen," said Annie, sniffing the lavender ruminatively.

"I couldn't help it, could I? Those things you told me were no good. I've not told Jack yet."

"Are you going to?"

"No blooming fear! I've got to get out of it somehow. Don't you know anything?" Mildred's eyes, wide and dark with her anxiety, searched her sister's for an answer. Annie shook her head.

"I don't know. Sarah Pounds did something, but look how sick it made her. And there was a girl in *News of the World*——" Annie broke off. "What're you going to do if mother finds out?"

"She won't. Least, not unless you sneak to her."

"Don't be soft. But don't you be so sure you can keep it quiet from mother. She always knows that sort of thing; don't you remember how she found out about Madge Morley nearly a month before the doctor knew? I suppose you get to recognise it when you've been through it all those times yourself."

"Yes, you'd think it would make them sorry for other girls," scowled Mildred. "But it doesn't. She'd

just like me to go on the same way she did herself—year after year, till my inside goes wrong the way hers did, and I can't have any more. I see myself! Kids all over the place and never a sixpence to spend on yourself. Jack would——” She broke off, biting her lip. She wasn't going to tell Annie what Jack would do if she had children. He had married her on that understanding. He was a Londoner, sharp and knowing. He knew just how far having kids limited a fellow's comfort, and he was having none of it. He was much older than Mildred, having served through the war. There wasn't room for kids in the post-war world, as he knew it; hard enough to make a living for oneself. Pleasure-loving, and with no particular maternal instinct, Mildred had eagerly adopted his point of view; according to Jack, and also to Annie, who was informed on such matters by a fellow-servant, it was an easy matter to avoid having them, if both did their share. He'd blame her, certainly, if he knew what had happened.

“Did you ever think of it?” she whispered tensely. “If they'd all lived there'd have been fourteen of us! I wonder what she thinks dad would have had to say to that? He'd have stuck it, wouldn't he—I *don't* think!”

“He's off on his travels to-morrow. You can fairly see the look in his eye—‘all on my own for ten days!’ Attaboy, dad!” grinned Annie, who had not been to the pictures for nothing.

“Nice way to treat ma—if she knows about it,” sniffed Mildred. “Do you think she does? Well, never mind. See here, Annie—come nearer, you

never know who's listening : I heard about a woman to-day——”

“ Now then, none of that ! ” said Annie, jumping as though someone had pinched her. “ I've heard about them old women in back lanes ! You go in on your feet and you come out in a box, and then there's a reg'lar row with the police——”

“ *Sh!* Hold your noise. It's nothing like that. Here, listen : you know the fair's on at Archover ? ”

Ursula loved her house ; her love had ripened steadily, from the day she entered it as a bride, into a mute understanding of the spirit of antiquity that stirred in the depths of the old thick walls and thatched roof. The Rector, an enthusiastic antiquarian, had striven in a number of lectures to rouse in the villagers something more than a passive interest in the dwellings which they occupied ; but for the most part they limited their enthusiasms to the exploitation of the tourists, English and American, who came in a thin sprinkling—for Aumbury is well off the beaten track—during the summer months, and the few artists and writers who had taken up their abode in the village itself, and seemed to be more interested in the pursuit of their own business than in antiquarian research.

Without any specific knowledge of the old-time builders who had made of every wall and cottage of this part of rural England a perpetual witness to the beauty of honest labour, Ursula had accepted their work as the complement of her own life ; its durability was not merely the durability of brick

laid cunningly on brick, of the inner, antique mystery of clay and wattle that broken plaster revealed here and there among the beams, but the durability of the human soul, man's everlasting urge towards the roof-tree, the symbol of his ego, his extension of himself in the home, the woman, the family. She felt these things confusedly sometimes, lying awake in the night, listening to the whispers in the walls, as though the wattle itself remained mnemonic of the winds that had stirred it in the swamps.

The intransigence of modern building filled her with unease ; it typified for her a thing far deeper than the dissolution of bricks and mortar—a dissolution of eternal things. She had sat silent on a visit to the little, jerry-built house and shop which Mildred and her husband had rented at the "new" end of the near-by market town, nervous as a mouse, suspended among uncertainties. She could not see how such flimsiness could fail to affect the relationship between Jack and Mildred, making that flimsy, unsettling it and destroying its powers of endurance. And she came back to her own cottage as a ship into haven ; its walls shielded her and her love from the threatening influences of the new world. Unconsciously she never crossed its threshold without making an act of love towards this cradle of all she held dear.

The little living-room—they had no parlour—was dark and square ; the thatch came down to the top of the window, and held away the sun with a broad bar of shadow. She paused with her hand on the

half-door, accustoming herself to its darkness ; if she went in with her eyes a-dazzle with the sun she might trip over Old Min, the cat, who lay about in the languor of fecundity, though it would be three weeks or more before her kittens were born.

Fenny, her eldest daughter, raised her eyes from the work she had in hand : a coloured confusion of straw and ribbons. Her hands continued to move languidly over the plait, arranging the ribbons cunningly over the hard core of twisted straw that stiffened them. The occupation displayed her thin, fine wrists ; she had Mildred's exaggerated slimness, but Ursula's blue eyes, with a fey look in them ; her eyes seemed much too large for her small, colourless face.

Ursula stood at the door, considering her eldest child. Fenny was the first-born, although she looked little more than sixteen ; physically and mentally, she gave the impression of retarded development. She was the odd one among the children, and Ursula herself knew that she did not know Fenny as she knew the rest. Because of it, she was always a little more tender to her : and because Fenny seemed to stand for some uncomprehended part of her self, of the confusion of dreams that had accompanied her first pregnancy, she gave her a rare kind of love, that differed from her affection for her other children.

" Well, have you got the kettle boiling, dearie ? "

" I forgot it," murmured Fenny, raising large, vague eyes from her straw.

" Well, you're a nice one, aren't you," said Ursula

comfortably, as she attacked the surly fire. "If that's how you carry on at Jacksons', I'm right sorry for Miss Blandford!" But her voice held a warm note of pride; she had been told by Miss Blandford herself that Fenny was an admirable servant. The news surprised her, for she thought Fenny too dreamy and far-away for service.

Fenny ducked her head, to conceal the flush that ran up her transparent cheeks.

"Let's see how you're getting on," said Ursula, lifting the plait and holding it to the light to admire it. "That's a bonny bit of work, and I declare you've got the fingers for a bit of finery. Your father'll be fain and proud of it—and so will the Pride."

Frowning, Fenny snatched the rustling plait from Ursula's hands; her small mouth set itself in an expression of distaste, but she went on with her work.

"And that puts me in mind," continued Ursula, going about her placid occupation of laying the table for tea, "I've got to tell your father he's to go round to Jacksons' this evening, before he takes his boots off. Think me on, Fenny, in case I forget."

"Does Miss Blandford want him?" inquired Fenny.

"'Tis the cesspool," said Ursula plainly. "'Tis a nasty, stinking job to do while the ladies are about, but they say they'll shut the windows, and he can get on with it to-night, since he's away so early in the morning. Them cesspools is a regular bother——"

"Oh, *mother*!" Ursula turned, and found herself looking down upon the parting which divided Fenny's hair into two sheaves of ashen silk. The girl's shoulders were hunched, her body shrunken into itself. Ursula both understood and was mystified. It was what the other girls scornfully called "Fenny's fine ways," and Miss Blandford "Fenny's refinement." Ursula was both proud of Fenny's fine ways and a little contemptuous of them; they did not seem to matter. Why should Fenny wince at the mention of wholesome natural functions?—of plain, necessary things, like cesspools and manure heaps and privies? Ursula understood modesty as a quality strictly concerned with relationships between the sexes: she did not know how to deal with queasiness when she met it. All the same, she would not have them teasing Fenny, when she was present; and sometimes she tried to show Fenny that she was in sympathy with her, without sharing her prejudices.

Ursula moved about the kitchen preparing the tea. Presently she forgot about Fenny and cesspools, and, standing over the singing kettle, pondered, as she was wont to do, upon the rich fulfilment of her life. By and by the same would come to Mildred, and then things would be all right between her and Jack again. All right. All right.

CHAPTER II

JIM DEVOKE sat beside the fire, with his short legs wide apart ; the heat ran up the insides of his thighs and warmed his stomach, which he scratched meditatively through the open front of his waist-coat. He had taken off his boots, and his stockinged feet were stretched out in front of him ; he wriggled the toes free of their long constriction, and unfastened the top button of his trousers to complete the effect of relaxation.

Although it was the month of May the air at evening was " thin " enough to justify the fire and his monopoly of it ; all through the day his women-folk had had their opportunity to crouch over it if they wanted, and now it was his turn. His attitude made him master of the fire, and the room, and the woman who sat meekly beside the lamp, with a sock drawn over her left hand.

Fenny had put on a coat to walk with her sisters down to the motor-bus which was to take Annie back to her work in the neighbouring village of Bramble, and Mildred to her home at Archover. Their departure was to his satisfaction. He had no paternal enthusiasms, although he got a certain amount of sluggish contentment from Annie's lively good looks. He was wont to say to Ursula that that was the way a lass should look—not a creeping jinny,

like his eldest girl, or a couple of boards clapped together, like Mildred. Annie was a fine ripe girl, and Ursula had better keep her eyes open. Like the majority of his kind, never averse to lightness of morals outside his own home, he was touchy and jealous about the virtue of his own family. Annie was at Bramble because her dark curls and gay black eye had attracted too much attention, in Jim's opinion, from one of the artists who had taken up summer residence in Aumbury; so she had been taken away from the dairy where she had been shaping into a good maid and sent, as a servant, to a village eight or nine miles away: a puerile distance, one would have said, had Annie's admirer been earnest in his attentions. But the artist forgot Annie as quickly as Annie forgot the artist, and the fact that she exchanged her country ignorance for a certain amount of tarnished knowledge, acquired at second-hand through a fellow-servant, did not distress Jim, since he knew nothing of it. If he had known, he would have shrugged his shoulders; it did a girl no harm to be a bit knowing—made her a livelier companion; besides, it meant that she knew how to look after herself.

Too many women in a house made it uncomfortable, he reflected. When he came in from his work the little room seemed full of them—Mildred, with her mouth pulled down peevishly at the corners: well, she'd something to look peevish about, marrying a fellow that couldn't act like a man and get her with child. Her red lips, at which he looked suspiciously, gave him a grudging greeting as he entered.

He had an idea she was painting her mouth ; red lips like those did not seem to grow naturally in so sallow and pinched a face. If she'd married an ordinary country fellow he'd have beaten her for painting herself ; that rat of a Londoner would let her do as she liked—or encourage her to make a trollop of herself. He turned his head away irritably : and there was Annie, prancing up and down, filling a basket with stuff and taking it out again ; and Ursula dancing attendance on her, and the whole place littered up with straw and ribbons—Fenny leaving it to the last minute as usual. It was like coming into a bloody Women's Institute ! He pushed his way through them, to wash in the scullery, and when he came back Ursula had got them into order : Mildred and Annie with their hats on, as if they were children going off to school, and Fenny buttoning her coat, looking like a ghost ! The door closed behind their chatter, and he had the place to himself, and peace.

A nice thing if a man couldn't have peace without working all day for it !

His work as groom at the Brambledown stables took him away from home early in the morning, and kept him until sunset, or later, in the hunting season. Brambledown was one of the largest farms in the district, run by a gentleman farmer, Captain Halcutt, who could afford, as a side-line, to indulge his taste for horseflesh. Devoke worked as subordinate to a saturnine individual whose care was all for the hunters themselves—Captain Halcutt's wife and two sons, both at public schools, hunted—and fell

superciliously short of the shire horses, which, although nominally in his charge, were in Devoke's care. And in his particular care was the famous Brambledown shire stallion, Brambledown Pride, which it was his duty to walk through the villages at the proper season, and take to the shows.

He leaned back in his chair, thinking of the Pride. His hands were thrust in his pockets and his head tilted back, with half-closed eyes. His eyes were small and black as sloes, tufted in with immense bushy brows that formed the single distinctive feature of his face. Without them few people would have remembered him, for there was little about the stubbed, piggish snout and thin, drooping moustache to challenge people's attention. "Yon black-browed fellow as walks the Brambledown stallion" was the description given by those who did not know his name ; his small, mean figure, pot-bellied and with rounded shoulders, became anonymous the moment he mingled with the other grooms ; only Ursula would have picked him out, not by his physical attributes, for she had ceased to find a meaning in these, but because there was something in her which went direct to him as to her soul's governor. She saw no absurdity in her deification of his commonplace person, and it did not for a moment occur to her how much of herself she put into the being that she worshipped with her body and her spirit.

It was Ursula who had pinned up on the wooden cross-beam of the chimney-breast a cutting from the local newspaper :

STALLION

“At Stud,” it said : “Shire Stallion, Brambledown Pride. This famous horse, which has been approved by the Ministry of Agriculture and Fisheries, will serve approved Mares and a limited number of Mares with Assisted Nominations. Particulars from the Owner, Captain C. H. Halcutt, Brambledown Farm. Route (health permitting and subject to alteration)—Monday : Leave home 8 a.m., by Aumbury, Plashett’s Mead, Todmarket, to Mr. S. Morley’s, Oxenden, to bait : thence by Thatch End, Woolpack, to Mr. A. Jenner’s, Spear and Plough, Downscombe, over-night.”

The list went on to give the itinerary for the fortnight, and ended with the name of J. Devoke, groom.

She had pinned it up there because it gave her the pride of simple people to see his name in print. She had looked at it a dozen times during the day—putting on her glasses to do so, because her eyesight had failed rapidly during the last twelve months. She did not like her glasses, because they made her feel an old woman, but, because Miss Blandford had insisted upon paying for them, she had got them, and was forced to admit their usefulness.

He leaned back, thinking of the stallion, as he had seen it that afternoon : out in the paddock, with the sun slipping down its burnished sides. A great white horse, white as silver, with arched neck, with hind-quarters spread as though for the show ring, and head lifted in immemorial pride. Like a painting in a story-book.

He had whistled, and the great horse turned his

head, and looked at him distantly ; the braided club of his tail swung, impatient of the flies that threatened his lordliness.

Suddenly, without warning, he came galloping down the paddock ; the turf gave out a hollow thunder beneath the great hooves about which the hair swung in fringes of silver. He checked his gallop a few yards from the gate, and came towards Devoke with the mincing step of a courtesan, a muted whinny in his throat ; but when he tried to touch him, he flung back his head out of reach of the coaxing hand. His nostrils trembled, the sun, catching them, turned their interiors to the scarlet of fresh blood. His ears went back like darts, the teeth showed themselves wickedly under a curled-back lip. Jim laughed. " You'll not be like that to-morrow, my fine boy, when they loose your halter in Dibden's yard ! " The horse stood still ; a current of sympathy passed between them. The rhythm of his body, that swung to a cradle-song in the short dark winter days, had mounted towards the superb climax of the spring. He had become difficult and dangerous to handle. Jim leaned on the gate, talking to him in a low, crooning voice.

" To-morrow I'll comb you and polish you till you look like a fine silver dish, and the women will be able to see their faces in you ! And you'll stand steady as a rock, while the young mares come up to you like up to a looking-glass. And you'll come with me, quiet as a lamb, because we know one another, don't we ? You'll play no tricks. See here." He rolled back his sleeve, and displayed to the white horse a

long scar that wrinkled the flesh of his arm between the wrist and elbow. "That's what your grand-dad did, nine—it'll be ten year ago, come Whitsuntide. He was a fine fellow, your grand-dad, and he'd no use for folk pushing and crowding him. So he forgot we was friends, the way you and me are, and got me there."

"Are you ready for your supper, father?"

He took his place at the table, in bucolic silence; she had expected no answer, and went about her service in meek acceptance of his mood. She knew what he was thinking about.

The York Show. The fine time they had had there—himself and the white stallion, the Pride's grandsire, Brambledown Pomp. There had been fine girls that year at York. He had come back to Ursula a little reluctantly.

It was disheartening to love a woman who did nothing but bear him girl children; year after year she had disappointed him of a son. He went on loving her, because love was a necessity of life, like eating and sleeping; but there were times when one wanted to take some fine, dark-eyed girl to bed and leave her to become the mother of a son. The birth of so many girls disconcerted a man: shook his belief in his power to perform the major creative act, to project his own male entity. His secret conviction was that there was something emasculate in the begetting of nothing but daughters; to fulfil the masculine within him a man should beget sons, and for his inability to do so he had for many years blamed Ursula. She was cursed;

she was lacking the germ that should produce a man child.

When at long last they had a boy, it was still-born ; again, and the experience was repeated. His own creative power was vindicated, but now he was assured that Ursula was cursed. He pitied her for it : went on—inevitably—getting daughters from her, but the desire to have a son deepened itself ; it passed from a matter of vanity to an obstination against fate : it was the subsidiary thought behind each lightly indulged fancy. Yet, ridiculous as it might seem, whenever results followed his frequent infidelities to Ursula, they were feminine ones !

“ I got the copper right well heated ; you’ll be able to have a grand wash-down,” she said softly, as she took away his emptied platter and set a clean plate before him. “ Cheese, Jim——”

How much did she guess ? He prided himself upon the fact that none of the women he had known had dared to make trouble for him. One or two had threatened, and he had turned ugly, and shown them what to expect. After all, they had known what they were about, as well as he ; he had never seduced a young girl—caution, and the consideration of means which is bitten into the bones of his class, had kept him away from that dangerous aspect of the game. He had taken his pleasure where it was offered to him—that was all it amounted to : and one does not offer payment when one has been invited to a meal.

Presently he pushed his plate aside, and returned to the fire, and to the day-old newspaper which

Ursula had folded over the arm of his chair. He spread it out, not with a view of reading it, but because it made a fence around him and his thoughts. Ursula made gentle noises, washing up in the adjoining scullery.

He liked to have dealings with women, because, apart from the physical satisfaction, his power over them nourished his self-esteem. The fact of his sex was an important thing to Jim Devoke—the most important thing in his life. In all but this one thing he was an underling, and, like almost every human being, he coveted power. In his work, in his play, in his acquaintanceships he was by nature an underling ; he was unable to command respect among his equals or his superiors. His wits were slow, even for that slow-witted district ; he never won at darts, or defeated a man in argument over his pint of ale. But always in his dealings with women, no matter how trivial, his sex made itself felt, and caused them to forget his mean physical attributes—his rounded shoulders and little, ignoble features. High or low, they responded to it, some with hatred, others with curiosity. Miss Blandford loathed him : she could not tell why, for, aware on which side his bread was buttered, he was invariably polite and respectful to her. Mrs. Halcutt, the Captain's wife, was curious ; her curiosity tempted him—she was a rare, sharp, wild woman ; but here again prudence held him in check. An affair like that would mean more than losing his job, it would mean being hounded out of the neighbourhood. So he confined his overt attentions to women of his own class, and, between

whiles, thought of Ursula, for she gave him his strongest reassurance of his strength and mastership over her sex.

He squinted at her round the edge of his paper, where she had brought her sewing to the light of the lamp, and sat quietly, stitching and humming to herself. Ay, she was a good wife. But he had been relieved when she came out of the hospital, to which they had been obliged to take her for her last baby, to learn from the doctor that there was no further possibility of her having children. Ten years ago that had been. It seemed to absolve him of part of his guilt towards her, because of course a man could not be expected to cease getting children when his wife, a comparatively young woman, ceased giving them to him. It had merely made him a little more careless of his relations with other women ; for all her tenderness, which never failed him, Ursula had become old to him. The safety of their relations could not compensate for something that was lost : as though the element of danger had been in itself a stimulus to his power of loving her.

"What are you smiling at, Jim?" Her voice reached him in tender amusement across the width of the room. He grunted, and shifted his position.

"Has Fenny got them braids ready?" he asked, for something to say.

"There's just the rosettes to sew on them ; I'll do them before I go to bed, if you like." The latch of the door was lifted softly, and Fenny slipped into the room like a shadow. Ursula chided her without acrimony. "You've been a long time gone!"

"Been cuddling with a fellow in the lane. Let me catch you at it, that's all!" He spoke jestingly, knowing it pleased Ursula when he was free with the girls: perhaps from a sense of making atonement for his thoughts.

Fenny's upper lip drew down in disgust; she addressed herself to Ursula, turning her back on her father.

"I just slipped round to see if Miss Blandford wanted anything."

"Your father's asking if you've done the ribbons for the Pride. It's all right. I'll sew the rosettes on for you."

"You'd let your husband go out on his wedding morn without sticking a flower in his buttonhole!" said Jim, rudely chaffing her; he did not usually take much notice of Fenny, but to-night he was good-humoured. His good humour turned to ill temper as the colour flew up her cheeks, and, with a low "Good night, mother," she hurriedly left the room.

"Dang it, the girl's like dish-water!" he exploded, as the staircase door closed after Fenny. "I never saw such a creeping, puling thing in all my days. She's too fine to live, that one. Dang me if I know however we come to have her kind."

"She's a good girl."

"Ay, too good to get married, I reckon!" He laughed incautiously, and she gave him a serious look before changing the subject.

"See, father—she's made the braids nicely, hasn't

she ? All afternoon they took her. They'll look bonny in Pride's mane."

"I fancy red and yellow myself," he grunted.

"The pink and green's uncommon," said Ursula doubtfully. She too would have preferred red and yellow, but pink and green were Brambledown colours, and Mrs. Halcutt, riding through the village, had left the ribbons the previous day. She smiled suddenly. "Why, look, father—they're spring colours, the colours of apple blossom." She picked up a handful of short wires, tufted with clippings of pink and green, that would be used to hold the plait in place ; in her mind's eye she could see the Pride, sprinkling the blue air with the silver of his mane. She saw, or thought she saw, what was in Devoke's mind, as he sat there, curling his stockinged toes and rubbing his stomach by the heat of the fire ; under the blackness of his bushy brows, in the small, opaque glitter of his eye, she saw, or thought she saw, little and exquisite, the image of the white stallion. She sought for word or gesture that would show him that she shared his happy anticipation of the morrow : that she understood that it was his holiday, his brief time of freedom from the irksomeness of his daily task, the tedium of his life at home. She understood, as few women in her position would have done, that what was peace and content to her was tedium to him ; she supposed it was so with all men ; that love of travel and variety was a masculine attribute.

"It's going to be a fine morning to-morrow, Jim ; there was a fine rosy sky when the girls went away."

"Ay ; it's queer it's nearly always fine the first day," he mumbled reflectively.

She remembered smiling when a neighbour said to her, with that false sympathy which her love translated as jealousy :

"My goodness, Mrs. Devoke ! To think of you having to let your husband go trapesing round the country with that horse of the Captain's ! I wouldn't know an hour's peace if I was you."

If Ursula lacked some hours' peace, the implication drew no admission from her, although she had flared into one of her rare passions when Mildred, of all people, remarked one day :

"I'd like to see what dad's up to when he's away, mother !"

"Don't you dare speak of your father like that, miss !"

"Why, goodness, mother, I didn't mean anything ! I was only thinking of the way some of the grooms carry on when they bring the horses into Archover——"

Ursula raised her hand and struck her daughter's cheek. When Mildred began to whimper loudly, and ran out into the garden, she was appalled. What would the neighbours think ? She had never laid a finger on the girls since they were children, and had often stopped Jim from doing so : and now she had struck Mildred. But deep in her heart she was not sorry, because Mildred had earned it.

And of course she knew, deep in her heart, that Mildred was right. There was some little sensitive patch in her that picked up, accurately as wireless

antennæ, the times when he betrayed her. She knew little, she guessed much ; there was, for instance, a black-eyed child over at Plashett's Mead, and a girl who drove a milk-float and turned her head away when she saw Ursula. These were such tiny signs that, ordinarily, one would not notice them ; but a love like Ursula's is bound to crucify itself upon tiny things.

The Vicar of her own parish had told her, when she married Jim, that it was in her power to do much for him ; that love was a great force for good or evil ; that Jim was hers to make or mar ; and that she must use her nobility to make him nobler.

She listened in mild surprise, but her mind had already reached its quiet decision. Love did not give one possession like that ; it did not even give one the right to thrust something of oneself upon another person. Her love for Jim was not to be used to force him into being something that he was not and could never be, but to help him to be more completely what he was. That way they could be happy ; the other way could only open a rift between them, could only stir him to resentment, discontent, mistrust of her. Love could not outlast such an attack upon his male pride. She had no resentment of the Vicar's advice, only the profound conviction that her love for Jim had strengthened her in a wisdom that would lead them to their own salvation by a surer path than that indicated by the Vicar.

Time had taught her that the path she had chosen, although sure enough, for Jim still loved her, was not the easy one. But she admitted no witness to her

struggles, she asked no help, even from her children. Her maternity took second place to her wifedom, save when its scope was enlarged to include him, her husband.

At last she allowed her hands to fall ; fastened the needle with a clicking sound into the little hard pin-cushion that Prue had made as a Christmas present for her, counted the spools of thread in the tray of her work-box.

"I've mended the grey shirt for you, and your clean socks are in your coat-pockets. You'll not be buying the boots?" Her eye turned towards the bundle which Mildred had left behind.

He frowned, chewing his moustache meditatively.

"I don't know. I could do with a new pair this week ; the old 'uns are shabby enough."

"If you can walk in them. New boots make sore going on a long journey. Maybe they'd blister you."

"Ay, that's likely enough." She saw him reluctantly relinquish the idea. "You can send 'em back then ; I'm not buying a pair of boots to oblige that none-such of Mildred's."

"P'raps I'll keep them against you come back," said Ursula softly. "They're good leather, if a bit clumsy-like in make, and a spare pair of boots comes in handy sometimes."

"I'm danged if you will !" retorted Jim, taken with one of his fits of puerile authority. "You'll send 'em back, and let that Lunnon feller know we're not buying rubbish, even to help keep our own darter !"

"Now, now, Jim, it's not rubbish, it's right sound hide——"

"I've told you!" shouted Jim.

"Annie's oiled your other pair," said Ursula diplomatically, "and polished your leggings as well." She got up, and fetched the leather leggings from a corner of the room; they smelt richly and strongly of sweat and polish and good roan leather, as she smoothed their glossy surfaces with the rough palm of her hand. "Aren't they bonny, Jim? Like a pair of horse-chestnuts!"

"You're a one for your fancies, eh?" he grunted, recalled by Ursula's sweetness to the fact that he was leaving her in the morning. Yes, they were a fine pair of leggings; they had belonged to Captain Halcutt, but the Captain had begun to thicken up, and the clasps would not meet round his boot-tops. As the boys' spindle shanks would not fill out the stiff moulded sheathes for some time to come, he had handed them out to Jim. Yes, they were a grand pair of leggings to draw attention to a man's calves; the firelight came off them, red as flame, and yellow as oranges. "You can be on the look-out by nine o'clock, or maybe a bit before," he conceded to her, and jerked his head towards the clock.

She turned obediently, and brought the tin tub from the scullery; four journeys she made from the copper, with buckets filled with hot and soapy water. He stood, leisurely disencumbering himself of his waistcoat and trousers, scratching his body luxuriously, watching her with the air of a sultan as she performed her duties for him. She fetched the tablet of carbolic and placed it, in its tin saucer, on a chair; she folded a flannel over the edge of the bath, and a

rough brown towel over the back of the chair, so that the fire should heat it. Then she went, a little heavily, up the stairs, and brought down his night-shirt, which she laid on the fender.

“Is that everything, Jim?”

His answer came to her out of the folds of the shirt which he was pulling over his head. She cast a quick glance at the thighs, with their thick hairy covering which darkened to a black forest on his lower limbs; then she turned and went for the second time up the stairs. Little as she was, she had to bend her head in passing under the low lintel of their chamber. She performed this act both as a physical necessity and as a tribute on entering a holy place; for her those four whitewashed walls enclosed the whole mystery of her womanhood.

As her tired body found repose in the vast billowing feather mattress, she thought it would be long before he lay by her side again. Meanwhile, likely as not, he would not see a bed, for the grooms walking the horses “lived rough,” and usually slept in the stables with their charges.

She heard the water splashing about and Jim whistling tunelessly, and smiled; there’d be a fine slop for her to clean up in the morning; lucky she’d picked up the hearth-rug and just left him the old roller towel to stand on. And there’d be the bath to empty. . . . She lay, weary but peaceful, waiting for him.

Downstairs Jim splashed and whistled and slapped his belly, grinning to himself. To-morrow he was going out, walking Brambledown Pride; and the

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white horse was not the only stallion that would walk the country lanes ! He remembered a buxom, yellow-haired girl over to Todmarket, and everyone knew the lively maidservants of the Spear and Plough ! The world was starred with lights o' love.

CHAPTER III

MISS BLANDFORD lived with her companion, Miss Sherlock, at the cottage known to the older inhabitants of Aumbury as Jacksons', which they had re-christened Green Gates. Their inability to impose the new title upon their neighbours was the single crumpled roseleaf of their existence ; for, in spite of painting the gates a peculiarly virulent emerald, and of leaving cards upon the call-able section of the community, with the words " Green Gates " neatly underlined in red ink from Miss Sherlock's pen, everyone, from the Rector down to the errand-boys, persisted in referring to it by the traditional name.

They had come to Aumbury to live the Bohemian life—not entirely from choice, but partly because gold standards and things like conversion had obliged Miss Blandford to close her big Georgian house in Hertfordshire and exchange rural splendour for rural simplicity. Fortunately the exchange was to her taste ; she had always longed, she confided to Miss Sherlock, to be a Bohemian ; and since Bohemia notoriously flings wide its gates to those who are well-off, genial, hospitable, and easy-going, Green Gates was speedily a rendezvous for the artists and writers of Aumbury, who no sooner learnt that a kind of glorified hotel, with beds and meals and refuge from

inconvenient visitors, was at their disposal, than they grappled Miss Blandford to their opportunist bosoms and proceeded to make her one of themselves.

Miss Blandford was a little surprised that living in Aumbury was very nearly as expensive as keeping up her Hertfordshire establishment, especially as they ran Green Gates without domestic aid apart from the ministrations of the Devoke family : but she concluded that one must pay for one's pleasures, and the timeless existence of Bohemia still had its appeal to her enfranchised soul.

Miss Blandford was a large, ambiguous-looking person in later middle age, who wore the old-fashioned uniform of the emancipated spinster, consisting of tailor-made and stiff collar ; the Rector's wife, who disliked her intensely—a compliment returned by Miss Blandford—was once heard to say sarcastically that no one would ever take her for anything but a gentleman. She had, in fact, the blunt and autocratic manner that goes with a certain type of good breeding, and which successfully concealed from all but her intimates that she was actually a mild and sentimental creature, devoted to her companion, whom she addressed as Lovekin.

On the face of things, Miss Sherlock was not a likely Lovekin. The daughter of a lower middle-class family, she cherished, in secret, resentment against Miss Blandford for her superior social status, and was prevented from surrendering herself completely to her friend's affection by her continual uneasy suspicion of patronage, and her watchfulness for slights. Lovekin was touchy ; even Miss Blandford

had to admit it, but charitably ascribed it to the state of Lovekin's liver, which, never a reliable portion of her internal economy, resented the Bohemian life. Sympathetically anxious for Lovekin's welfare, Miss Blandford frequently suggested more regular hours and a stricter diet : but the wine of Bohemia had gone to Lovekin's head, as well as to that of her friend ; in Miss Blandford's solicitude Lovekin suspected deep-laid plots to cheat her of enjoyment, and stubbornly upheld her own independence. " My dear Amicia, if you can stay up until three in the morning, drinking beer and talking about Pan-Hellenic nudes with the Mortimers, surely I, who am fifteen years your junior, can do the same ! " " I suppose so," grunted Miss Blandford. " And, by the way, Lovekin, you might try to get out of the way of calling me Amicia—it sounds so *Victorian* here."

They were breakfasting on the porch, because neither could face the parlour, with its orgiastic remains of last night's party, until Fenny Devoke had come to " clear away." Miss Blandford, in pyjamas covered with a gentlemanly dressing-gown, had the advantage of Lovekin, who, girlishly averse to such masculine wear, had been obliged to slip into a skirt and smock. They had returned, rather feebly, the morning greetings of a couple of their last night's guests, who passed the gate proclaiming heartily their intention of taking a swim in the river.

" *That's* beyond me, at any rate," growled Miss Blandford, in a baritone aside : there was a note of relief in her voice that drew the eyes of Lovekin

sharply in her direction. Amicia—Blandford, she corrected her thoughts hastily—certainly looked all in ; her complexion wasn't what it used to be, by any means, and she had puffy crescents under her eyes. Lovekin hugged in secret her fifteen years juniority. The coffee made by Blandford had revived her, and she felt almost lively, as she scraped the last drops of cream and corn-flakes out of the bottom of her plate. Miss Blandford ignored the corn-flakes, lit a cigarette, and glanced between narrowed eyelids across the hedge.

The raised floor of the porch overlooked the Three Oaks meadow from the rear ; unwittingly Ursula shared her love for the three brave trees with her employer. They reminded Miss Blandford, in their grouping, of the Prince of Wales's feathers ; they wrote themselves upon her mind in heraldic terms—"Three oak-trees vert, on a field azure."

"Do you think the Slades are really married ?" asked Lovekin suddenly. Miss Blandford's eyes flew wide open.

"Why ever not ?"

Lovekin nodded triumphantly.

"You never know, with people of that kind," she averred. "He's very odd, I think—most interesting, of course, but *odd* : those sandals and that beard—biblical, almost. And you know they haven't any swimming-suits with them."

"I don't get the connection between the Bible and swimming-suits," said Miss Blandford drily ; "and they probably had them on under their clothes."

"Much more probably not." Lovekin tossed her

head. "I must say I'm becoming quite broadminded about that kind of thing ; it's all a matter of environment."

Miss Blandford gazed dimly at her companion ; was this Lovekin's way of informing her that she was thinking of bathing naked with the Slades ? She knew that Lovekin would like her to protest against such a line of conduct, and yet this morning she felt curiously indifferent—even to Lovekin. She looked away again, this time towards the left, where, at a little distance, ran one of the thatched walls for which Aumbury is famous ; the soft fawn tufting that ran along its top was turned to the colour of ripe corn as the sun's beams overtopped the shadowing roofs of the adjacent barns.

"Just look at the sun on that thatch," she said, sitting up abruptly.

"It's pretty," agreed Lovekin : and bit her lip. For one did not call things "pretty" in Bohemia. One spoke of their "relative values," of their "vibrations."

Miss Blandford got up and walked down to the gate ; she stood there for a few moments, puffing at her cigarette, looking down the village street, with its early-morning patching of mauve shadow, and the painted stillness of its trees, like a canvas by Monet.

"I think places like Aumbury convict one of a rather vulgar ignorance," she said suddenly. Lovekin stared. "One should know the meaning of these thatched walls and the old cottages with tiny windows winking out of their thatch, It's not enough

to know that they're Anglo-Saxon and wattle-and-daub, and that there's a thing called herringbone brickwork——"

"I suppose that's what our education does for us," said Lovekin, pulling herself together. "It flings a few facts at one and leaves one fundamentally ignorant."

"Speak for yourself," said Miss Blandford tersely. "You've been educated—at least, you've been to a school : I haven't. Our governesses weren't chosen for what they knew but for what they were : it took eight decayed gentlewomen, one after another, to teach me to spell Mesopotamia and write an acceptance in the third person. As far as education goes, my mind, at least, is virginal !" Miss Blandford plunged her hand into the pocket of the gentleman's dressing-gown, produced a large silk handkerchief, and trumpeted so loudly that a spotted lurcher, lying in the sun, leapt to its feet and started barking.

"Your coffee is getting cold," pointed out Lovekin, "and your slippers are wet with the dew."

"The purpose of education, so far as I can see it," pursued Miss Blandford, thoughtfully slipping a foot out of a scarlet Turkish slipper and rubbing it in a clump of pinks, "is to quicken one's perceptions of the realities of life. In that respect I should say that Ursula Devoke, for example, is better educated than yourself or I."

Lovekin looked slightly offended and raised her eyebrows.

"Not that it matters if one approaches the unknown in a spirit of humility and awe. Although

why one should owe awe to mere antiquity"—she waved her cigarette towards the thatched wall—"goodness only knows. Everyone knows that these cottages are iniquitous places to live in ; any urban council would condemn them. No drainage to speak of, and no light or air. I suppose passing generations have adapted the occupants' lungs to their environment."

"You do get down to things, don't you?" said Lovekin, gently sarcastic.

"I'm trying to." Miss Blandford ignored the sarcasm. "Shall I tell you what I'm thinking just now?" Her broad, square figure returned up the flagged path, scattering the dew from the low edging of the border with the hem of her dressing-gown. "That all this Bohemian stuff is just cheap flummery: a kind of masquerade. You and me, sitting up all night, pretending to talk about things we don't know anything about, and neglecting the real things that lie about us."

"I thought you liked it," pouted Lovekin.

"Well, I do—at least, a part of me does: because it's something new, something I've never done before. I've only just begun to realise that I'm on the wrong track."

"You haven't had enough sleep lately," put in Lovekin hurriedly. She did not want Miss Blandford to take it into her head to leave Aumbury, which was fun—much greater fun than anything that had previously come into Lovekin's life. "Why don't you go back to bed and have a good rest? You'll feel better after that."

"No, listen, Lovekin," said Miss Blandford earnestly. She sat down opposite her companion and leaned forward, spreading her knees generously wide ; her complexion was already scorched by the sun to a line corresponding with the edge of her collar, below which the flesh was white as almonds ; her eyes looked with a worried expression out of their network of wrinkles. "Do you really see any difference between me and a London actress ?"

Fortunately Lovekin's sense of humour was not strong enough to betray her into laughter. She looked quite shocked as she replied :

"I can't imagine what you mean."

"The revolting 'fashion' for living in these old places," went on Miss Blandford. "Advertisement. High heels and cocktails. Paris gowns and American back-chat. What's the difference between that and sandals and whiskies, hand-weaving and Pan-Hellenic nudism ? Artificial, either way."

"What would you substitute ?" inquired Lovekin, trying to sound good-tempered.

"Wine," said Miss Blandford deeply. "And good food and firelight ; books and conversations and silence. Just at this moment I could kick myself because, in listening to the rubbish that was talked under my roof last night, I missed the sound of the pastoral heart of England beating in my very ear."

Lovekin felt slightly alarmed. There were moments when she surrendered against her will to something in Miss Blandford which she could never understand. Essentially artificial, she was awed and rather frightened when she was brought up against the

truth. At a certain stage of emotional exaltation Miss Blandford was given to speaking the truth, which was often awkward, and almost always disconcerting. Now, although weary, she appeared to be exalted ; fatigued in body, but fresh and lucent in mind.

"What's the good," she demanded furiously, "of living in contact with things that have known the heat of the sun and the furious winter's rages for centuries, if one cannot absorb one particle—not one little particle—of their wisdom into oneself?"

"I don't see what you have to grumble about, Am—Blandford," said Lovekin, relinquishing her temper. "Wine and good food and firelight—we've got all those ; and books—I'm sure we've never read so many books in our lives. We would never even have *heard* of half of them if we'd stayed in Broxbourne——"

Miss Blandford appeared about to froth at the mouth, controlled herself, and laughed shortly. Stretching out her hand, she gave Lovekin's a squeeze.

"I don't know what's the matter with me, and that's the truth, Lovekin ; I think I only want to be quite real. And all these anticking apes, with their Pan-Hellenism and their hand-weaving and their beastly hand-thrown pottery, are getting between me and reality ; I'll have no more of them."

"And as for conversation," pursued Lovekin, who never allowed a topic to be dismissed until she had finished with it, "I don't know what you call Kay Slade's exposition of the Pan-Hellenists——"

"Balderdash, darling—plain balderdash. 'What's

Hecuba to him or he to Hecuba ? ' His enthusiasms are just as much a matter of affectation to him as my interest in them is to me. I don't care a damn for Pan-Hellenic nudes, and neither do you. What the devil are they, anyhow ? Pan-Hellenic bilge ! " said Miss Blandford vulgarly. " There's no such thing, except in the tin-can brains of these lunatics, that go on echoing a catchword because they've nothing else in them——"

" You don't sound as if you're happy in Aumbury," complained Lovekin.

" Happy ? I'm happy enough, but I feel as if I've got hold of the place by the wrong end—I'm seeing it backwards, or something. To know Aumbury, to realise what it stands for, what it can make of you, you need to start with people like the Devokes : with Ursula herself. By the way, Fenny's late this morning."

" Perhaps she's not coming again to-day."

" I'm afraid she's not at all strong," said Miss Blandford, with a tender inflection.

" Perhaps we'd better look out for a more dependable girl," suggested Lovekin, with a touch of malice.

" That's not at all necessary," said Miss Blandford coldly. " One doesn't pick up that refined type just anywhere."

" I wonder if Devoke's really her father," said Lovekin, voicing the doubt of all newcomers.

" I shouldn't think so," said Miss Blandford positively. " By the way, we must find someone else to look after the cesspool."

"Why? I always think Devoke's so amusing—quite a village character."

"Certainly a village *bad* character," retorted Miss Blandford. "Heaven knows how she came to marry him. I loathe the way he looks at me with his little pig's eyes. He—he makes me feel indecent."

"Oh, nonsense!" cried Lovekin, in a shrill, excitable voice. "A man like *that*!"

"I prefer not to discuss it," said Miss Blandford, rising. "Well, I suppose we must get dressed, sooner or later——"

"What's that noise?" asked Lovekin, in an attitude of attention.

The heavy sound of a horse's hooves beat on the road beyond the hedge. The hoof-beats were irregular, as though the beast were caracoling; a man's voice spoke soothingly. Lovekin gave a squeak of alarm, as over the hedge appeared the rearing head of a white horse. Accustomed from childhood to horses, Miss Blandford, forgetting her dressing-gown, hastened down to the gate.

Proudly headed by the white horse, a straggling group of villagers came along the street. The group was mostly composed of men and boys, although a few toddlers staggered along, oblivious of the school bell, which had sent out its cracked summons from the other end of the village ten minutes or more ago. From the schoolroom came distantly the faint, unrecognisable echo of the morning hymn.

Miss Blandford was surprised to see Ursula, running suddenly ahead, bare-headed, with a bunch of wild flowers in her hand. Her eyes, alone, were not for the

horse but for its leader. For a moment Miss Blandford's attention was riveted by the expression on Ursula's face : it was a dedicated look, a look of one who held a holy secret. It made Miss Blandford look away hurriedly, as one guilty of invading another's privacy.

The white horse was giving trouble ; it was all that Jim could do to master him—so resentful was he of authority, so urgent the sap of life within him. A fabulous beast, astray from the pages of legend, he trod his proud course down the street, conscious in every fibre of the sensation he aroused, of his own supreme strength and his power to overawe the puling mortals who kept well out of reach of his threatening heels. They had not blindfolded him, and his eye of midnight darkness rolled with priapic scorn upon his surroundings.

Suddenly, without warning, the flowers fell from Ursula's hand ; a frail rain of mauve and yellow, they lay in the dust. Miss Blandford, whose eyes had been drawn to the unexpected movement, expected her to make a sign of dismay, perhaps to try, perilously, to recover them, before the horse's hooves trod them into the dust. But she stood suddenly still, calm and expectant, while down the street, following the tracks of the farm wagons, came the white horse with his attendant. With a shake of his great head that set the ribbons and his mane a-flutter—silver and pink, silver and green, and silver—he pranced past Miss Blandford's gate. With his mighty hooves he crushed into the ruts made by the wagon's Ursula's offering of flowers, and, as he

reached the gateway of Dibden's stackyard, his scorn of the halter breaking through his high demeanour, he raised himself for an instant on his hind legs, with forefeet striking at the sky. It was thus she had her last sight of him—of a white stallion rearing against a sky of kingfisher blue.

The stackyard gates closed, and a drover was chasing a few grinning yokels, who were disposed to remain, away from the entrance.

Miss Blandford returned slowly up the path ; her knees felt weak. She was thinking less of the white horse than of Ursula's act of homage. The white horse and the man, passing across the flowers ; for which did she intend the tribute ? Miss Blandford felt dazed, as one who has been hit on the head, mistrustful of her sight and memory.

"Had you forgotten about the horse ?" asked Lovekin, in a disapproving voice. She had remained on the porch, fidgeting with the disordered breakfast-table. "I remembered as soon as you had gone down."

"I suppose I had."

"I think it's rather disgusting," pronounced Lovekin, looking schoolmarmish, in spite of the lively smock and bare ankles. "I mean, with everyone round in the day-time ! I was surprised at your going down to the gate."

"I forgot about it," repeated Miss Blandford. "It's a magnificent animal. I should think it's worth a great deal to the Halcutts in stud fees."

"Don't be coarse !" snapped Lovekin.

Miss Blandford stared, and suddenly broke into a laugh.

"I suppose, in spite of Pan-Hellenic nudism, you believe in the necessity for the propagation of the species !"

"It's *quite* unnecessary to think about it," said Lovekin, vanishing in a huff. Miss Blandford stood still, smiling to herself, for a minute or two before she went indoors.

She had reached the stage in her toilet of knotting her stiff and gentlemanly tie when a tap came at her bedroom door.

"Oh, I'm sorry, madam ; I wondered if you were ready for me to make your bed."

"Come in, Fenny," said Miss Blandford, in a mild voice. Fenny slipped into the room, closing the door behind her carefully. In her frock of pink print she looked like a schoolgirl rather than a woman of twenty-four.

Through the looking-glass Miss Blandford watched the slim body bending over her bed, swinging the blankets over the bedfoot, beating the pillows. Yes, it was nice to have a girl like Fenny Devoke to do these things for one. Like the majority of well-bred spinsters, Miss Blandford was fastidious about her intimate belongings. Much as she detested domestic work, she would have made her own bed rather than have allowed some dubiously clean village damsel to handle the linen in which she laid her body at night. Fenny was really very sweet ; she had a delicate way of touching things ; her fingers were very smooth and fine.

"Are you better this morning, Fenny ?" inquired Miss Blandford tenderly.

"Oh, yes, madam, thank you." She never addressed Lovekin as "madam," reserving the title for Miss Blandford, for whom she entertained a romantic devotion. She loved being with Miss Blandford, loved doing things for her ; all of Miss Blandford's possessions were invested for her with a peculiar holiness. Even the tooth-glass on Miss Blandford's washstand seemed to Fenny to bear no possible relation to the enamel mug which stood, for the same purpose, on her own. She now lifted the hot-water bottle, in its pink velours cover, tenderly out of the bed, and prepared to empty it.

"Have you got a hot-water bottle, Fenny?"

"Me? Oh, no, madam ; sometimes, on winter nights, I put a brick in the bed."

"A brick? That sounds very uncomfortable. Doesn't it make a mess of the sheets?"

"Oh, no, madam ; it's a special kind of brick, you know—glazed—and all that," ended Fenny confusedly. She was most embarrassed by Miss Blandford's interest in the vulgar appointments of her own home.

The water spouted from the neck of the water bottle. Miss Blandford stood by her dressing-table, drumming on it with her finger-tips. Presently she crossed the floor, and laid her hand awkwardly on Fenny's shoulder.

"Take the hot-water bottle, Fenny ; keep it, I mean—for yourself. They're nice—when one has a pain."

"Oh, *no*, madam !"

"Take it," repeated Miss Blandford brusquely,

and walked out and downstairs. Lovekin found her reading *The Times* with a very red face.

"I say, Blandford! You ought to know this. Really, I wouldn't have expected it from Fenny."

"What?"

"I've just been in the kitchen, and I found your hot-water bottle tucked away under an apron in the bottom of Fenny's basket!"

"And why, may I ask, were you poking in Fenny's basket?"

"Well—well—really!" stammered Lovekin. "If you want to know, I'd mislaid my gardening scissors, and I was looking everywhere for them——"

"You might as well leave Fenny's things alone in the future. If you want to know, I gave it to her."

"You *gave* it to her? But what are you going to do——?"

"I suppose I can get another, can't I?"

Lovekin laughed unpleasantly.

"I must say you're going the right way to spoil Fenny!"

Miss Blandford laid down *The Times* with a dangerous deliberation.

"Allow me to remind you that I have run a household of ten servants, and that I am not accustomed to being accused of spoiling my maids!"

But under her wrath stirred a softer thought. Perhaps Lovekin was jealous because she had given the bottle to Fenny! Her imagination showed her Fenny, slim and virginal in her nightgown, getting into bed with the bottle to warm her cold little feet.

She pulled herself up with a smothered exclamation, and forced a smile.

"Are you going to get your hat and walk into Todmarket with me?"

"I believe you're sentimental about Fenny Devoke!" stabbed Lovekin.

"Don't be ridiculous."

"*I'm* not ridiculous. An ordinary village girl!"

"I thought we had agreed that Fenny isn't in the least ordinary. I am not proposing to make a friend of her."

"I wouldn't put it past you. I suppose that's what you mean by getting hold of the right end of Aumbury!" sneered Lovekin.

"Once and for all, I will not be spoken to like that."

"Oh, I'm quite aware you're my employer!" flounced Lovekin, on her dignity in a flash.

"Do not be so idiotic. And for goodness' sake don't let's start a cat-fight." Miss Blandford went to the door and called into the kitchen: "Is anything wanted, Fenny? We're just going into Todmarket."

"The olives are finished, madam. And two of those bottles—I can't remember what it's called—are empty."

"I meant to remind you we'd finished the vermouth," sniffed Lovekin.

"Then we will do without it. I've finished with acting as a free-drinks counter to constitutionally thirsty artists," pronounced Miss Blandford. Lovekin sulked; she had acquired the taste for cocktails since coming to Aumbury. "Anything else, Fenny?"

She knew she only asked because she wished to give herself the pleasure of listening to Fenny's soft-toned reply.

"I don't think there's anything else, madam."

"I can't think why she always calls you 'madam' and me 'miss,'" sniffed Lovekin, still in a mood to be difficult, as they stepped out into the sunlight.

"One of the penalties of your youthfulness," smiled Miss Blandford, telling herself that she would *not* quarrel with Lovekin, poor thing, whose position put her at a disadvantage. "I suppose she thinks that if I'm not married I ought to be."

She broke off ; they were crossing over to Dibden's lane, and in the dust lay the remains of Ursula's flowers. She halted for a moment, to poke them with her walking-stick.

"Really, these country children should be trained not to gather flowers and then scatter them about," commented Lovekin.

Miss Blandford was silent ; then she ground her ferrule into the heart of a primrose.

"Yes," she answered grimly ; and they walked on.

CHAPTER IV

THE WHITE road ran behind them like a spool of ribbon, knotted here and there ; the knots stood for the villages, Aumbury, Plashett's Mead, the tiny town of Todmarket, Oxenden : Thatch End, Woolpack. The Pride went easily now, sedate and biddable on the halter ; gracious and replete, his nozzle even sought Devoke's hand, as though he desired to express his gratitude to the author of his joys. Jim chuckled and suffered the caress, but did not return it. He knew better than to take liberties with the Pride. Let those wait for the return journey, when, likelier than not, the white stallion would be so tamed as to allow one to ride on his back.

At Thatch End they had shown him a fine yearling which the Pride had sired the previous spring ; darker than his father, he stood like a figure of shimmering steel in the rose-red shadow of a barn ; wary, mistrustful, ready to fling up his heels and gallop away at a hint of danger. But there was wistfulness instead of arrogance in his curtained eye, as though he knew his fate, and of what mankind had deprived him. Jim stood, chewing his moustache and a straw ; ay, the Pride had sired a grand son. The old envy stirred in his heart as he followed the stableman to the inn, where they drank to the Pride's future progeny.

Now, up on the downs, with the sweet air brushing

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their faces and the earth-fragrance rising beneath the downfall of the dew : with the necromantic green of the evening sky passing into violet and the May moon thickening from a translucent bubble of silver to a honey-yellow circle in the sky : with his shadow and that of the white horse flung alongside of them upon the whispering grasses and the chalky road—he acknowledged that it had been a good day. He looked doubtfully at a few cloud-banks, thinking it would probably rain on the morrow : but it had been a good day.

The dust lay thick on his leggings, but they had been bright enough when he walked into Todmarket and tasted the first sweets of his holiday. Todmarket women are a lively lot, and at first he regretted that they were to bait at Oxenden, and not at the Stag, whose mistress had shown herself complaisant in the past. However, there had been nods and winks and greetings enough to speed him upon the road to Oxenden, and the dairymaid he remembered from his last visit : cross eyes she had, but she was a fine hot girl who lost no time in coming to the point. And at Thatch End and Woolpack he had added to his conquests, although in no material fashion : he chuckled at his memories, and yawned aloud, lulled by the rhythmic beat of the Pride's hooves on the road. He'd need no rocking to-night, nor any embrace to call the sleep to his eyelids. As the lights of Oxenden pricked the dusk ahead of him his thoughts were of the food and the beer, and of the soft bed of straw he would enjoy, rolled in the blanket, when he unstrapped it from the Pride's back.

The following evening found them forty miles from home, entering the village of Clover.

Despite its name, Clover is one of the few ugly villages of that part of the county. Its main street consists of a double row of labourers' cottages and mean shops, behind which huddle the honeycomb of slums in which the majority of the population lodge. There are mills at Clover, and a third-rate picture house which has grown, a monstrous stucco excrescence, over the shell of an old Georgian mansion ; three gasometers mark the beginning of the village street, obscene crimson guardians of its secrets. The Pride advanced, tittuping, as though offended at being brought into such ignoble surroundings.

Devoke did not pay much attention to the gasometers, nor were his senses offended, as Ursula's would have been, by the slovenly cottages, with their grimy curtains, and blind, blistered doors. His forecast had been correct : it had been drizzling most of the day, his clothes were damp and the Pride, bedraggled, would need a good hour of grooming before settling for the night. One of his bookings was cancelled, and he had done badly in tips—an important aspect of his faring—and in encounters. It seemed that the brightness of his first day was to be balanced by the drabness of the second. As they reached Clover, with its rain-polished cobble-stones and mud-patterned pavements, his heart rose, for he was tired of the dreariness of the wet lanes, and, as the rain had stopped and the sky was full of a watery gold, there were plenty of people abroad. As the white horse and its leader passed, they turned their

pale urban faces dully towards them : a few winked and nudged their companions, one or two nodded recognition. The arrival of the stallion was not so important to them as the establishment, at the other end of the town, of a tenth-rate fair, whose few shabby booths and side-shows occupied a piece of waste land used partly as a rubbish tip. A broken-down ring of hobby-horses formed the nucleus of the booths and the showmen's caravans, and ground out a ten-year-old musical comedy tune which, instead of cheering, cast an indescribably melancholic atmosphere over the few villagers who waded through the mud between the stalls. "It'll be livelier later," they consoled each other, "when it's dark and the lights are lit." But there was little conviction in their tones, for it was difficult to gather an impression of liveliness from the half-starved, anxious-looking faces of the show people, who seemed to lack heart or energy properly to cry their wares. Perhaps they too were waiting for the lights, for that false gaiety of artificial brightness which neither sun nor moon can conjure.

Horse and man plodded doggedly through the village, he with an eye alert for provocative glances, galled by the apparent indifference of the Clover folk. The mill-girls were a poor lot, he decided, and relinquished hope. They were not spending the night in Clover, but were making for a farm a mile or two beyond the village, on the road to Sloope, where they had a booking for the following morning.

Figures moved sluggishly out of their way as they advanced ; as is usual in country places, the population of Clover preferred the middle of the street to

the pavement for its peregrinations. Half way along the street, a dray had wedged itself across the roadway, the horses half in, half out of the entrance to an alley ; they had to stop while the driver struggled with the two patient beasts. The Pride looked on scornfully.

While they waited, a girl came to the door of a haberdasher's shop, with a roll of cheap green ribbon in her hand. She stood with her back to Devoke, but he noticed the smouldering copper of her hair and her long, restless body, dressed in rusty black. Her shoes were shamelessly down at heel.

"This colour'll do," he heard her say to the shopkeeper, who had followed her suspiciously on to the pavement. "I'll want a couple of yards. Stop ! How much is it ?"

"Fourpence ha'penny, that one."

The girl's arms dropped to her sides, with a gesture of relinquishment.

"It's no good. I haven't got it."

"Here," said a voice behind her. "Make her give you three yards—and knock off the three ha'pence !"

The girl spun round in astonishment. She saw a man standing there, holding a white horse, and smiling at her. Her mouth fell a little open.

Jim Devoke had never seen so thin a face. At first its thinness shocked him, made him repent, for a second, of the absurd gesture. The next moment he knew that, had she been hunchbacked, bow-legged, or lacking an eye, he would have had to have made it : it was not a mere matter of giving a girl a shilling (which he could afford) but of buying her attention

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to himself. All day long his self-confidence had tottered ; either the women were virtuous, or his talisman had ceased to hold its power. And now a girl was standing staring at him : waiting for him to put his spell on her. He smiled into her eyes, the sense of power reviving in him. One might begin a worse way than that. Yes, she was thin as knives : looked as if she'd cut a fellow if she lay with him. But some of those thin ones could beat their plumper sister at making love. Her thinness wasn't like Mildred's thinness—the flat, tasteless, complaining kind. She looked like a thing consuming in its own heat.

The flesh that was dragged over the girl's facial bones was blotched with great golden patches of freckle, and these again were blurred out beneath a richer, darker tan. When her astonishment at seeing him had faded, her colouring seemed to alter, to go grey, as though a light were withdrawn. She had slanting eyes of a dark, cunning grey and a great wide mouth, revealing her square teeth. Her neck, which was long, unspeakably fragile and bony, was shadowed by the thick curtain of her hair, whose dense brown waves which the sun lightened to copper fell almost to her shoulders. A loop of it was caught back in a cheap comb, of which most of the glass studs were missing.

Her shabby black cardigan and skirt hung on her body as on a framework of bone ; yet it was as though some feverish meaning quivered beneath the framework, some leaping flame that articulated her and even suggested hidden beauties.

As these things dawned upon him, Devoke

became aware of an answering excitement : as though an unspoken demand had passed between them. Later he said that in that moment she took possession of him : it was to be the key and cornerstone of his grudge against her, that instead of his possessing her, she possessed him ; it was the thing he could not forgive. But in that moment of encounter he ceded to her unconsciously, only aware that his quest had succeeded, in the hour when he was prepared to acknowledge failure.

And she—she looked exactly what she was : a derelict thing—as she slowly raised her hands to her hips, and looked at him with her head a little on one side ; there was mockery in her look, and unbelief. Only when he continued to keep his eyes on hers did she slowly lift her left hand, and hold it towards him, palm upwards.

He understood what she meant, and laughed as he took a shilling from his pocket, and dropped it upon the flat, soiled palm.

She said nothing, but nodded across her shoulder to the shopkeeper, who evidently understood, for, after a sharp look at Devoke, she hurried into the shop with the roll of green ribbon.

“ And what do you expect for that ? ”

The girl had a harsh voice, with an ironical twang in it. Her eyes measured him, and passed comprehendingly to the white horse.

“ What’s your name ? ” asked Jim.

“ Tamar ; what’s yours ? ”

“ Jim,” he answered cautiously.

“ You’ve got a nice horse,” she said indifferently.

"Ay," he answered. His eyes questioned hers, met with blankness. The shopkeeper came to the door with the ribbon, twisted in a scrap of thin paper; Tamar handed her the shilling, then rapidly undid the paper, dropping it in the gutter. Ignoring him completely, she proceeded to loop the ribbon through a button hole of her cardigan on one side, and through a hole on the other. Then she drew the ends together, tied them in a bow, and, with the slow, concentrated attention of a society woman before her mirror, patted the bow into a butterfly upon her breast. She performed this naïve act of self-adornment quite seriously and without coquetry, indifferent to the fact that she was in the public street—as calm as though she were in the privacy of her own chamber. When it was finished she looked up at Devoke, and there was something almost diabolical in her smile.

"There—that's better," she said. Her air lent her words a certain crypticism. The setting sun blazed out abruptly and surrounded them both with a wild gold. For the first time in his life Devoke knew the fear of woman ; but his bewitchment was stronger than his fear. He had not the sense or the knowledge to realise that in Tamar he had met something fatal, something that was to change the whole complexion of his innocent sensual life and set dry rot creeping about the core of content. He laughed at the absurd green ribbon, whose ends hung almost to her knees.

"You'll not go through the town like that !" he said, pointing to it.

"I've nothing to cut it with," she replied, considering him.

"I'll give you my knife." He meant he would lend it to her; he took the knife from his pocket, and prised the hooked blade free of its horn sheath, holding it towards her. She took it, looked at the blade, and fingered her ribbon.

"I'll not cut it," she decided. "'Twould be a waste."

With movements of an incredible quickness, she snapped the blade back into the sheath and dropped the knife in the pocket of her cardigan; the thin black wool sagged under its weight. She snatched the ribbon from her breast, and, almost before he had time to see what she was doing, she had bound it twice round her head and twisted it into a knot on the nape of her neck, looking challengingly at him, this time, for his approval. Her small head, flattened by the ribbon, reminded him of the head of a vixen: the thrust of her long slim neck was the questing thrust of an animal's in search of prey. She scared and attracted him with her strangeness; the figures of other passers by seemed to fuse into a dark background to them both, like unreal patterns woven into an old tapestry. The living things were himself and Tamar, and the rest were only shadows.

"I must be getting on," he said, with difficulty. The dray had moved out of the way, and the Pride was tired of standing. "Come along a bit with me."

She made no demur, and the three of them started again along the street.

"Where are you going?" inquired Tamar.

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"Lilly End," he answered, "and to-morrow to Sloope. Do you belong these parts?"

He would have believed her if she had told him that she came from the underworld or from Faery; but she laughed, and said that she belonged to the fair, and that they were staying the night at Clover, before going on to Todmarket.

"Maybe you'll be coming to the fair to-night? Maybe you'll have a girl with you?" she hinted cunningly.

"Why should you think I'd have a girl with me?"

"Black-browed chaps of your sort is always after the girls," she taunted. Her hands were on her hips, and she walked loosely with the stride of a boy. With her face to the setting sun her age betrayed itself: she was twenty-eight or thirty, and the hard, wary wisdom of her life had stamped itself into the lines of her body. She had no kinship with the slow, heavy women of the countryside, with its buxom, bouncing girls. She might have had gipsy blood in her—there was that kind of wildness and suspicion in her movements.

They reached the fair-ground, with its doleful little booths, its battered hurdy-gurdy, on whose pointed roof the stripes of red and blue had run into drab magenta with many weathers. The caravans themselves were poor things of doubtful axles and patched sides, with scraps of rag fluttering at the dirty windows for curtains. Nowhere were signs of spruceness or self-respect to be seen. The hobby-horses hung in their motionless circle, their music, which had so far failed to attract customers, stilled:

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here and there a tail or a limb was missing, or straw bulged from a verminous saddle. Through the humid dusk came from time to time the most melancholic of all noises—the cough of a dying beast. Two or three spavined horses, with sores on their hind-quarters, stood with their heads together in hopeless patience behind the caravans ; they were less like horses than like brutal charcoal caricatures.

The proprietors of the side-shows stood behind their counters, languid with the sense of defeat that had soaked into them during their endless travels. Both men and women seemed to be a tuberculous lot, with the eyes and manners of thieves ; one man sat apathetically on an upturned bucket, catching fleas ; two were gambling. Over all lay the same miasmatic influence ; they seemed to lack the slightest will or power to make the effort towards success ; they had ceased to expect the public to patronise their miserable entertainment. A boy who moved among the stalls, lighting the naphtha flames, typified an imp of this subfusc hell. The faces lit by the flares were dumb, stupefied, like those of creatures awaking to their responsibilities from morphia dreams. The horse coughed again ; a man's voice, an echo in the house of the dead, began uncertainly to cry his wares.

A few yokels shambled towards a shooting-range, where an old woman silently offered them rifles and then appeared to go to sleep. The yokels squinted along the rifles, grinned at one another, put them down, and strayed aimlessly away.

It was not a tempting spectacle ; Jim Devoke

stared doubtfully at it. The girl's voice said at his side, defensively :

" It'll be livelier later on, when the mill-folk have had their suppers and come out to enjoy themselves."

" What do you do ? " he asked gruffly.

" Oh, now one thing and now another," was her evasive answer. " It all depends what the customers want."

The implication of her words struck him like a dart, his hand tightened on the Pride's halter. He put out his free hand and caught Tamar's shoulder, twisting her round so that she faced him. His small eyes glowered, surly, into hers.

" Will you be here later—if I come back ? "

" Maybe," she answered carelessly. Almost unconsciously his hand rose and touched the green ribbon. Her lip curled scornfully, but she nodded to show that she understood.

He could trust them at Lilly End, he reflected, later, as he worked with brush and water at the fine silver fringes of the Pride's hocks. Drabbled and caked with mud, they kept him busy for an hour, before he was able to assure himself that he had done his duty. The Pride stood in his stall, his soft nose buried in the manger ; the lantern-light caught the silver plume of his tail, switching softly to and fro ; about his feet the sweet dry straw lay scattered deep as a meadow in harvest ; in body and mind he was content. Jim cautiously explored the stall to see that there was no projecting splinter or hook on which the stallion could injure himself ; he had previously

tramped the floor, in search of insecure grid or brick-work, and found all as it should be. Walking stallions had taught him to take these precautions, for he had had his experience of the indifferent lodging provided by unconscientious farmers and inn-keepers for visiting horses. He then went round the stable with lantern in hand, seeking for any crack or cranny through which a stray cat might enter in the night and scare the Pride into a frenzy.

Having heaped the straw in the neighbouring stall for his own bed, he left the stable, locking the door behind him. Yes, he could trust them at Lilly End. Lucky for him it hadn't been Downscombe, where the stable lads were always up to larks, and one had to keep one's eye skinned all the time.

The rain had stopped, and the night was sweet and bright, with a faint prickle of stars in the sky. He checked himself as he strode along the lanes, for what was the good of walking himself into a sweat? The night was yet young; the later he went the more chance he had of getting her. He forced himself into a steady tramp, reminding himself that it was a long two miles to Clover: but all the time the image of her burned in him as though she had, by some witchcraft, made herself part of his sinew. It was different from his usual careless desire for a woman; it was like a sickness that gets a man down and makes him useless. It had in it an element that he could not understand: something beyond the senses and yet of them. For the first time, in his relations with women, he doubted himself; he wondered if he was equal to her and feared the test to which he was

unerringly drawn. What if he should never be able to get her out of his mind again? He thrust the thought aside, for experience had made him confident of his power to leave such things behind him. Yet he was unable to rid himself of the apprehension that, as things had never been the same before, so they could never be the same again, having had Tamar. He suspected her of the power to steal something from him, so that thenceforward he should go lacking that very thing—yet not knowing what he lacked.

There was in him so little of the heroic that, at the sight of the lights of Clover, he halted and had it in his mind to creep back—back to the safety of his stall next to the Pride : but, while his spirit warned him of danger and shrank within him, his flesh urged him on to the fatal encounter. He kept seeing her thin mocking face, the great wide mouth and the narrow, secret, feverish body. Her body became a kind of grail to him ; by attaining mastership over her through her body his manhood would consummate itself in some godlike, undreamt-of fashion ; he would become god-man. She had infected him with something worse than the simple primal hunger of man for woman, so swiftly roused, so swiftly slaked ; he had got to conquer her or lose his manhood, lose the thing dearest and most important to him. She was his ultimate end, his test, the proof of all his powers ; she had it in her to nullify or to crown all his past victories. Prudence might bid him avoid the test, but something stronger than prudence spurred him towards it. As he walked into the blaze and

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tumult of the fair he was like the bull-fighter who makes his début in the formal *corrida*.

Tamar had been right in saying that it would be more lively later on. The muddy alleys between the booths were now crowded with men and women, the crackle of the rifle-range rang through the strident tune of the hobby-horses which swung round under their load of yokels, the hoarse yells of the stall-keepers directed attention to their wares, and a sluggish trade went on in bits of china, fly-catchers and hair-combs ; the mill-folk were cautious of their money and the villagers had little to spend. They preferred to spend it on the livelier amusements and at the ice-cream stall. Jim stuck his hands in his pockets and thrust his shoulders into the crowd.

At first he despaired of finding her. The strange faces formed a blur before his unaccustomed eyes, and there seemed little chance save of jostling and being jostled between the booths ; his feet squelched in the mud underfoot, dogs ran between his calves, and children squealed with terror and clutched at his leggings as he stood, in confusion and doubt, close to the swinging circle of light of the hobby-horses. One or two girls attempted to force themselves upon him, but were driven away by his growl of resentment.

At last he saw her—beside the coconut shy, which was one of the most extensively patronised of the side-shows. He stood for a few minutes, his heart turning over in his bosom, watching her, as, unconscious of his observation, she handed the wooden balls to the customers, or tossed a coconut to the

victorious one. She performed her duty with an air of sour amusement, and, when she had nothing to do, stood hugging her body and talking to the fellows who crowded about the shy. He fancied that each one of them was bargaining with her, and his face and neck began to burn. He thrust his way to her side and touched her elbow. She turned and looked at him, at first, as though she did not recognise him ; then her face lit with a mocking look of recognition.

" I've come, you see."

" Oh, ay, I supposed you'd come," she said indifferently, and turned away from him, to pick up the wooden balls and pile them against the canvas backing of the stall. He scowled upon her companion, a tall weedy fellow with a muffler pulled up about his unshaven chin ; he had a cigarette stuck to the ragged corner of his lip, and never ceased to encourage the competitors with hoarse cries of approval. "'Arf a inch an' you'd 'a done it that time ! Thass a way, son—put yer guts into it ! 'Ard lines—better luck nex' time, eh ? 'Ow about anuvver try ? Four shies a penny. One penny only fer a fine ripe cokernut—come on now ! Fourth time's lucky—o-ver 'e goes. Naoh ! Four shies a penny !" He leaned against the counter with his arms folded, leaving Tamar to do the work ; now and again she looked up at him with a vicious expression. In between-times she hugged herself and watched the ball-throwers blankly ; her face never altered ; its expression was the same for the seedy fellow who, having wasted sixpence, shambled away

mumbling obscenities as for the tall conceited youth who with a superior smile struck the mark with three successive shots and was plainly unpopular with the proprietor of the show. She handed the tall one three coconuts without troubling to look at him, and bent to her ball collecting again.

At this moment her companion's eye lighted upon Jim.

"Now then—'ere's your chance ! Come on now—four shies a penny—show the girls what you can do !" he exhorted, with what seemed to Jim a malicious jocularly. He scowled and thrust his hands deeper in his pockets. He had no intention of making a fool of himself in front of Tamar, and he knew that he was useless at that kind of thing. For a moment he burned with longing to be able to eclipse the performance of the conceited youth—to bring down a coconut with each of his four balls ! That would be something worth doing.

He nudged Tamar's elbow again ; she looked at him with surprise.

"When are you going to get out of this ?"

Her eyebrows arched themselves.

"I'm busy, aren't I ?"

"I didn't come to watch you being busy, you know that !" he retorted angrily. She shrugged her shoulders.

"I can't help what you came for."

"You can help it all right if you like."

"You don't want much for your shilling, do you ?" she retorted, turning away again.

Not only his face and neck, but his whole body,

burned. He would have liked to have knocked her down. In his anger he retorted loudly :

“ And what about the knife ? ”

She laughed, with her back to him. He felt baffled, ridiculous, and suspected the others of sharing Tamar's amusement. He glared, from behind, at the green ribbon, which she still wore twisted round her head, the badge of her insolent defiance of him. The coconut-shy man's attention had returned to him.

“ 'Ere ! 'Ere's a chap as is scared to try 'is luck ! Come on now—let's see yer bring down a fine ripe cokernut to take 'ome to yer best girl ! Four shies a penny ! ”

Someone laughed, he became conscious of eyes, challenging and mocking, fixed upon him. His head swung towards Tamar, like a tortured animal. She stood leaning on the counter, one hand on her hip ; her eyes measured him. Impatient of the delay, balls cracked on the wall behind her. A rumble of applause followed a successful shot. She continued to regard him, her head slightly on one side, as though she were weighing a problem. She evidently came to a decision with herself, for she picked up a couple of balls in each hand and came towards him.

“ You'd better have a try. And if you bring down a coconut—I'll come out with you ! ”

He spun on his heel away from her, with a smothered exclamation, and, in a mood for murder, beat his way through the thickening crowd. At last he was standing on the high-road ; the sweat ran down between his eyes and his breath came

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sobbingly, and, without knowing it, he was whimpering aloud. His limbs were a-tremble, the darkness dazzled him after the lights of the fair. He was a thing lost, as his feet bore him by instinct towards Lilly End.

Presently he stood in the darkness and cursed her. He had a soft, weak voice, and it was broken by his sobbing. She had broken, she only could mend him. His everyday self was broken like an earthenware cup, and his soul and spirit, all the vanity and appetite and self-love that his body contained, were spilt and ran away in the dark grass. His mind whimpered for comfort, and found none. A devastating loneliness took possession of him—the loneliness of one deserted by his God.

CHAPTER V

URSULA came back from the cottage door where she had been standing to listen.

"Fenny. I think the bees is going to swarm."

"The blue hive?" Fenny raised her head from her needlework. Lately she had been entrusted with Miss Blandford's mending, over which she now bent reverently, darning a minute hole in a silken vest.

At the end of the garden stood the hives, a ramshackle row; the old blue hive stood last in the row, the home of a fractious cross-bred colony. To begin with Ursula had favoured the English bees; then someone had told her that the Italians were better workers. By introducing an Italian queen into an English hive Ursula unwittingly had wrought confusion, and, incidentally, parted with her peace of mind; for cross-bred bees are a vicious lot, ready, she declared, to sting at sight; and there was no longer peace to be had by taking the old rocking-chair down into the patch of shadow near the hives, where for so many years she had sat and rocked her babies, and allowed the bees' summer song to penetrate her being with its still content.

Fenny laid down her sewing and went to the door. The air was threaded with the slow silver flight of the returning bees as with gossamer; heavy with treasure, they dragged their load of gold, of orange,

and of scarlet through the low dark portal of their city gates. The full, warm song of the hives took its colour from the sunshine, the thrusting buds of the sycamores, and the flower-sewn earth. Rising and falling like a summer sea.

But from the old blue hive came a note that made discord in the slow, swinging symphony of peaceful labour. Fenny knew that note ; it meant that the bees were getting ready to swarm. Presently it would change : become shrill, penetrant like a bugle, as the swarm gave out the announcement of its flight.

“ Yes, they’ll swarm to-day,” nodded Fenny ; the bees were her especial care. Long ago Ursula had relinquished them to her. Able as she was herself in handling them, she knew that Fenny was better. She was the kind the bees like : small, dry, and spinsterly, with prim light fingers that never faltered in the delicate task of handling the frames. Mildred was always scared of the bees, and they hated Annie, who offended their fastidiousness with the strong, animal scent of her plump body, the clumsiness of her nervous hands. It fascinated all of them to watch Fenny with the bees : to see her remove a section of honey and hold it up to the light, with the small, brown bodies of the bees walking over her uncovered wrists and fingers. She was a true bee woman : in dealing with the bees her nature—ordinarily meek, indecisive, colourless—concentrated itself, became operative, sure and capable of decisive action. Even her voice changed, its cold, thin, virginal note became low and

crooning and full of love. "Quiet, my beauties—go to sleep now, my beauties": it might have been Ursula speaking. It was as though the bees alone had power to bring to floescence in her eldest daughter some rich seed of Ursula's sowing.

Fenny picked up the frying-pan and an old iron key, and set them in readiness; her practised ear had told her that it was not yet time for her to set up her accompaniment to the furious song. She drew her chair nearer to the door and resumed her sewing, listening meanwhile to the conversation between her mother and a neighbour who had come to borrow a grid-iron from Ursula.

"You'll have heard from your husband since he went away, likely, Mrs. Devoke?"

"Nay, Jim's not a writer," answered Ursula placidly.

"Few men are: but a postcard, maybe——!"

"When you've been married twenty year, Mrs. Barrow, you don't reckon much of postcards!" The quiet gleam of her smile lit Ursula's eyes for a moment and died away.

"Well now, then! I'm sure I'm glad I'm not you. Bert and me hasn't spent a night apart since we was married."

"It's you have had the luck," was Ursula's calm reply.

"Oh, well!" The neighbour threw a nod and a wink across the drooped head of Fenny. "There's times when you feel you could do with a night to yourself."

"I've never felt that," answered Ursula.

"It's all a matter of taste," said the neighbour, receiving the grid-iron. "I'm much obliged to you ; Bert's that keen on a bit of food done over the fire—I was nearly forgetting to ask after Mildred. Our Minnie saw her, and said she was looking right poorly——" The immemorial question echoed in the words.

Ursula nodded.

"Ay ; it'll happen be in February. A long time to wait." She was not aware of Fenny's shoulders drawing themselves together, of the revulsion which her words had caused.

"You don't say ! Just fancy you a grandmother ! It's to be hoped the business is doing better," she added inquisitively.

"Oh, I think they're doing nicely," said Ursula, dismissing impertinent curiosity.

"Well, you'll be getting Annie off your hands next : unless it's Fenny ! You'll have to look sharp, Fenny—it'll never do to let your sisters get married first !"

The girl raised her head, and startled both women with the peaked violence of her expression.

"What I do or what I don't is my business, I reckon."

"Dearie me ! I'm sure I didn't mean to give offence !" snapped the visitor, and flounced off down the garden path, bearing Ursula's grid-iron.

"What made you speak that way to Mrs. Barrow ?" asked Ursula, after a moment's hesitation.

Fenny mumbled some inaudible reply, bending lower over her work.

"It's not the way to speak to folks when they're kindly," pursued Ursula.

Fenny lifted her head again ; her small thin face was scarlet.

"She's got no business to talk about me getting married ! "

"Well, that's what you'll do some day," said Ursula, with placid maternal certainty.

"I'll never get married ! " cried Fenny.

"Why ever not ? "

"It's beastly. I never shall."

"Don't talk silly," said Ursula. "And if you aren't going to get married, what do you mean to do ? " she asked mildly sarcastic.

"Be a nun," muttered Fenny, dropping her head again.

"*What ?* " said Ursula, standing still. She doubted her ears.

"Be a *nun*," repeated Fenny defiantly.

"Whatever for ? "

"Oh, mother, why do you keep on at me ? I want to be a nun," said Fenny desperately, "because I hate men. I can't bear having them near me. I hate everything to do with them." She suddenly rose, threw her work aside, and ran out into the garden with her pan and key.

Ursula stood still beside the table. She was fundamentally shocked. It was to her as though Fenny had proclaimed herself an atheist ; it was the denial of her life's creed—the creed of the male, embodied in Jim, her husband. For a moment Ursula felt as she might have done if she had been delivered of a

handless child ; Fenny appeared a maimed thing to her. But maimed things can hurt, and Ursula felt wounded—wounded as she had been when Mildred went away without telling her about the child she was expecting. She had tried to put it down to Jim's arrival, tried to believe that if her father had not been there Mildred would have drawn her aside at the last minute and whispered the news in her ear—if she did not want the other girls to know it. For she knew she was not to be deceived ; the child-look on Mildred's face was not to be mistaken. She had seen it there in the moment of their meeting ; her own heart had leapt in response to it, but she had waited, wisely, for Mildred to tell her.

Feeling that she had been betrayed in both her children, Ursula gave a sigh, as she leaned over the table to fold up Fenny's work. She had a sudden poignant longing for Jim's return, a feeling that only his presence could make up to her for his children's betrayals. The maternal spirit within her stirred strongly towards him ; latterly that maternal spirit had been in the ascendant. It had crept in, somehow, since her operation, which meant that she could have no more children : the operation which they had had to perform upon her in hospital when the last child, which died, was born. The mother and the wife, mingling in her attitude to him, had made her mistress of a new and almost overpowering tenderness : sometimes it seemed to her the apotheosis, the ultimate perfection of her love for him. But there had been times when she had wondered whether Jim were not a little dissatisfied by this new relationship,

which she was unable to conceal from him : as though he preferred the days when she met his manhood simply with her womanhood, and did not claim that mysterious maternal power that, somehow, gave her superiority over him. He was wrong in interpreting it as superiority, for, paradoxically, since she became aware of this maternal element in her relationship to him, she had grown even more humble, even more ready to acknowledge his supremacy and power. But like the majority of his kind, Jim Devoke invariably put down the existence of something which he could not understand to the assumption of superiority on the part of those with whom he had dealings, and Ursula was conscious of a tiny friction whose existence she could not help, between them. It had clouded his absence from her, and made her at moments anxious where she had been serene ; but, whenever its presence made itself felt to her, she struggled against it, for she felt that it was an evil, and that, in entertaining it, she was failing Jim.

She looked out at Fenny, perched in the fork of an old pear-tree, bent ground-deep with age and its bygone harvests. It would yield no more fruit, although the blossom-buds, marked with their little Rosicrucian symbol, crowded the twisted boughs. The pear-tree reminded her of herself : her love could still blossom, but it could bear no more fruit. Fenny—a nun ! She comforted herself by reflecting that to be a nun one had to be a Roman Catholic. Perhaps she would grow out of such fancies, although she had reached an age when the trend of the bough is shown by the bending of the twig.

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Suddenly the sound for which she waited came : or rather the silence—the fractional pause in the internal tumult of the hive. Fenny jumped from her pear-tree bough and hastened towards it. Dong, dong, dong, dong ! went the key on the frying-pan : she danced as she beat, unwittingly, her eyes fixed on the entrance to the hive. Ursula drew towards the door, her unhappy thoughts dispelled by the excitement of the moment.

Suddenly the board was blackened by the out-pouring swarm : the air was thick, was whirling with wings, the rich revolutionary song overwhelmed the peaceful bourdon of the other hives. Fenny stood in the midst of it, entranced, virgin priestess of the strange orgy, no longer dancing but clanging with the key on the pan, while the jubilant multitudes swirled about her in increasing velocity ; their tiny bodies zoomed through the air with the force of bullets. Across the board poured the outgoing army, glittering, formless, a stream of lava and crystal with bright flashes of bronze : crawled to the edge, dripped over, broke into fifty thousand volleying particles, darting for a moment, hither and thither, directionless, until one unanimous thought lifted them towards the blue. Upward, upward, spinning, first like a far-flung shimmering mist, then darkening to compacter formation, glitter and shade woven into a cloud that hung momentarily black against the white puff-balls of the sky, then streamed in ovate formation before the breeze.

“ Run, run, Fenny ! ” called Ursula.

Flinging down her pan and key, Fenny ran, praying that the swarm might not carry far. As she rushed out of the gate, looking up at the sky, she almost knocked Miss Blandford over.

"Fenny!" cried Miss Blandford, after the flying figure. Fenny halted for a moment, to call back some inaudible explanation. then sped on.

"What's the matter with Fenny?" cried Miss Blandford, hastening up the path, Ursula, who was putting on her hat to follow her, smiled.

"She's just following the swarm," she explained.

"The swarm?"

"The bees."

Miss Blandford stood for a moment, looking at Ursula, whom she liked and respected. She had come from Green Gates to make a suggestion, but understood that this was not the time for it. Instead, she turned on her heel, preparing to precede Ursula down to the gate.

"I'd like to come and see the swarm, wherever it is," she remarked.

"Do, ma'am—if it's not gone too far. It's a bother when one loses one's bees," said Ursula, scanning the sky.

Miss Blandford heaved a sigh of pleasure. She had left Lovekin helping the Slades to dye hand-woven material; she was suffering from a great revulsion against the weaving industry, artistic society in general, and the Slades in particular. She had flatly refused to allow her bath to be used as a dyeing vat, and had categorically forbidden Lovekin to flaunt herself in the homespun abortions—the expression

was her own—emanating from the Slades' looms. She had declared her intention of shutting herself up alone in the parlour and reading Shakespeare. Shakespeare, she pronounced, was the only literature that one should read in Aumbury, and Lovekin could clear out all those damned Wyndham Lewises and Evelyn Waughs and Nicholises as soon as she liked ; they stank of London drawing-rooms ; she was not going to have Green Gates stinking of London drawing-rooms. She had come down to Aumbury to be simple, and simple she would be, though all the hosts of Slade and Mortimer should batter on her doors. There was no simplicity about self-conscious hand-weaving, carried on by a gang of lunatics who thought more of anticking about in sandals and beards than of the stuff their looms turned out. She'd have none of it. Lovekin could do as she liked.

She said these things fiercely, trying to disguise her motive from herself ; but it sat like a small black demon at the bottom of her well. She was tired of Lovekin. Since coming to Aumbury something had gone wrong ; she saw Lovekin in a different light. In conventional surroundings Lovekin had passed muster : that was to put it mildly. At Broxbourne she had loved Lovekin ; her thoughts had centralised in Lovekin, whose life of limitations had called out all the warm pity and affection of which Miss Blandford was capable. But the Lovekin whom she had loved at Broxbourne seemed to bear little relation to the Aumbury Lovekin, who had become—she could not but admit it—more than a little vulgar.

Lovekin had gone arty, and, as such, she was of no earthly use to her employer, who, although amused and entertained by her first taste of Bohemian society, was fundamentally too sincere to adopt its poses. She was quite fed up with irregular hours and habits, and loudly announced her reversion to her own traditions. Lovekin, with the bit in her teeth, had not the sense to take the hint, and Miss Blandford had known that the breach between them could not much longer be ignored as she watched Lovekin, a foot-long scarlet cigarette-holder in her mouth, a bottle of Napoleon in her hand, set forth for lunch with the Slades—to which Miss Blandford had not been bidden. Nor would she have gone had she been asked ; but Lovekin's desertion flung her upon her own society, not for the first time by any means, and she had begun to ask herself what was the use of a companion who did not companion one ? It was foolish to pretend that affection existed between them any longer ; frankly, Miss Blandford was nauseated when Lovekin, momentarily aware of a chill in the air, attempted to revive the old relationship.

“ Does it want to go s'eeepy-byes, then ? ” in saccharine accents from Lovekin, the night before, had drawn from Miss Blandford the terse rejoinder, “ For God's sake talk English to me.” The name Lovekin was tacitly dropped ; Miss Blandford developed some ingenuity in avoiding the use of any name at all.

So she set to work upon Shakespeare, and, like most people who have not mastered the art of

reading Shakespeare for pleasure, she found herself, at the end of a score of pages, a little dazed and weary. She had deliberately set herself to read, not one of the "interesting" plays, but, with the vague notion that her mind required an astringent, had plunged into *Henry VI*, and found herself floundering in a sea of historical allusion, which, together with occasional archaisms of language, completed her confusion. It was then that she closed the book, sat for a moment biting her lip, and ended by putting on her hat and walking along to the Devokes'. She did not choose to analyse her motive, but, realising half way that some explanation of her call was necessary, she decided to open the previously mooted question of Fenny's coming to Green Gates as a full-time servant.

She had had this in her mind for some time, but, as she had not even now come to a decision, the swarming of the bees served aptly to divert Ursula's natural curiosity as to the purpose of her visit.

The swarm had not carried far, but, in bee fashion, had established itself as inconveniently as possible upon the bough of an alder that twisted itself out from the main trunk across the bed of a stream. Hastening, at Fenny's summons, across the meadow, she watched it forming itself: first a ball like an orange, then the size of a melon, then of a pumpkin, then, as the bees came streaming towards it, growing swiftly into a great egg, the egg of some inconceivably gigantic bird, beneath whose weight the bough dipped slowly towards the water. The sun smote the spherical mass sidelong, turned it to iridescence ;

slowly the humming died down, there was peace, silence, save for the gurgle of the stream, as it flowed steadily towards the water-cress beds. Miss Blandford, who had never seen a swarm before, was enchanted.

"What do we do now? What do we do now?" she demanded, excited as a girl.

"We'll have to take it," said Ursula soberly. "A swarm lost's money lost. Bee law says that the owner whose land the bees swarm on can claim it, unless the bee-master gets there in time."

"Let me help," cried Miss Blandford.

They spent the next hour splashing in and out of the stream, trying to find purchase for the step-ladder from which Fenny could reach the swarm. Miss Blandford, who had hurried home for gum-boots, and who had been provided by Ursula with an old bee veil, visualised herself as some huge primeval monster, splashing in the swamps, and grinned wryly behind her veil. In contrast to her own movements where those of Fenny, who poised barefooted, like a dryad, on the river-bank, reiterating her warnings to the others not to make a noise that would disturb the bees. Thrilling with the new experience, Miss Blandford fawned upon Fenny's commands.

Ursula did little but watch Fenny anxiously as, clasping a straw skep in her frail arms, she cautiously mounted the ladder which they had at last succeeded in wedging in the bed of the stream.

"What do we do now?" whispered Miss Blandford to Ursula; she could not take her eyes from the

reed-like figure that balanced so precariously on the ladder, manœuvring the skep beneath the apex of the glittering bunch of bees.

Ursula lifted a clothes-prop from the ground.

"I give the branch a bang with this, and they drop into the skep," she said laconically. "P'raps you'd be so kind as to put a hand to the ladder, ma'am? Are you ready, Fenny? Have you got it wedged? You can't take the weight on your arms, you know."

"I'm ready," said Fenny, in a muffled voice.

"Oh, be careful!" breathed Miss Blandford; leaning upon the ladder she closed her eyes, imagining she knew not what horrors: the ladder slipping, Fenny falling, smothered in angry bees, pierced with their stings . . .

"Ready?" repeated Ursula.

The faint voice murmured "Yes": Miss Blandford, supporting the ladder, felt a shock, there was a noise like sea-shells falling. Presently she heard Fenny's low laugh above her head.

"That's got them."

The swarm was in the skep, covered with a cloth; a few bees escaped from the bunch, circled wildly, with angry buzzing, round Fenny's head.

"Could you hold it while I get down?" She had forgotten to use the word *madam*: Miss Blandford marked the omission with a sense of triumph, as she received the skep into her arms, staggering, for a moment, under its unexpected weight. Fenny, to bear that weight! Miss Blandford stood in the water, hugging the skep, her heart thumping against her ribs.

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Between them they bore the skep back to the hive, where Ursula had spread the white cloth and board for the bees' reception. Miss Blandford laughed as she watched them crawling obediently back to their home. From the bees' point of view, it seemed such an anti-climax !

"They've done what they set out to do," said Ursula reflectively. "The young queen's wedded ; she's had a rare day for her junketing."

"Oh, be careful !" cried Fenny suddenly. "There's a bee on your hand, madam !"

She's remembered this time, thought Miss Blandford, in dissatisfaction. She looked down at her right hand, from which she had, rather prematurely and incautiously, removed the glove. A little fiery dart ran into her, the bee dropped off, its life ended.

"I'll get the blue-bag," said Fenny, running into the house.

As Fenny's skilful fingers ministered to her sting, Miss Blandford sat back in a chair, allowing her eyes to close luxuriously. It was a very little painful, but quite worth exaggerating in order to enjoy the benefit of Fenny's ministrations.

On leaving Broxbourne she had dismissed her personal maid : Bohemia and a lady's maid were not compatible. And Mills had been a habit rather than a necessity : Mills did her mending—which now Fenny did much better. Yes, she must have Fenny in the place of Mills, as maid and companion. This girl of cottage breeding had delicacy where others had only coarseness, she was sensitive where others were obtuse, she was gentle and capable of a

lasting devotion. Miss Blandford was not certain where she got these notions, but they were there ; perhaps they had passed from the tips of Fenny's long fingers into her now bandaged hand. She must first settle Lovekin's hash—

“Is that better now, madam?” asked Fenny softly, raising her head. Their eyes met ; slowly the colour dawned in Fenny's pale cheeks ; Miss Blandford withdrew her hand rather brusquely.

“Yes, thanks.” Absurd—and unsuitable—to want to kiss the girl as she knelt there, so meek and acquiescent : all melted into humility once again. Miss Blandford knew, however, that it was the moment when Fenny had revealed herself as authoritative, experienced, and unconscious in her authority that had decided the problem on which she had been meditating.

As she marched down the path she did not know that Ursula's eyes followed her with a puzzled expression, and then returned to Fenny, who began again to sew feverishly on the silken vest.

CHAPTER VI

“HER’S AS pernicky as an old maid in a thunderstorm !”

A rumble of laughter went round the semicircle of men in the corner of the rickyard as the mare broke away once more.

The early morning sun sucked up the heavy dews of overnight like a lover with his lips laid to the breast of his mistress ; rose and gold and mauve, the layers of colour shimmered through the imperceptible haze of rising moisture from surrounding brickwork ; a dung-heap was veiled in a floating blue mist ; a hysteria of fowls broke the stillness, rose to frenzy, and was quenched in the anticipatory silence of the yard.

The white stallion paused, bemazed a little, shaking his silver mane. His wooing was not progressing ; the mare he had come to serve was a dry, spinsterly creature, clumsy and ungracious in her withdrawals, void of coquetry, scarish and uncertain. The Pride had grown selective ; he turned his head for a moment towards his audience, as though to admit that he was willing to resign his *droit de seigneur*. The mare clomped heavily to the farther corner, and stood, looking mawkish. The prince and the pantrymaid. The Pride was bored, but, as no one came forward to relieve him of his duty

by placing the halter round his neck, he resigned himself to the inevitable, and walked after her. It was a thing to be done, like eating a tasteless meal, because one's body required it. After a momentary hesitation, during which he seemed to make up his mind that to woo her further was to waste his artistry, he reared. His mane and tail flowed backwards like cascades of crystal down a mountain of silver.

"Good lad," grunted the mare's owner ; coin passed from his hand into Jim's.

"Minds me of a time I bedded a lass over to Brambledown races," grinned a stable-boy. "Her were just that kind, surelie ! Dull as a whipping-post and cold as a puddle from start to end !"

The mare was led sheepishly away, while the men passed under the low farm doorway to commemorate the occasion with beer.

Jim drank sullenly, wiping the froth from his moustache with the back of his hand. It would take more than beer to buck him up, he reckoned. After a wretched night on the straw, his body felt overcharged, yet void ; food had lain sourly on his palate. He was in a mood to quarrel with any man, and the edge had been set to his discontent by the Pride's conduct, by the graceful indifference with which the white horse performed his duty, as though less from inclination than from a sense of *noblesse oblige*.

Tamar was bitten into his thoughts like caustic ; she stung him until he could have bellowed aloud, and flung himself into any element—fire, water, or air—that offered oblivion of her torment.

The jesting of the men around him stung his wound like gadflies, and he cut short his farewells. They stood to watch his short figure with the rounded shoulders, as it slouched in the shadow of the white horse down the lane.

"Summat's warped Jim this morning."

"May be his girl's jilted him!" guessed one shrewdly.

"Jealous o' the Pride, more like!" The guffaw reached Jim's ears and made him grit his teeth. It emphasised for him his own ignominy, his secret and profound disgrace. The Pride was sulky too: for the first time there was ill feeling between him and his master. More than once Jim snarled at him, as he jerked on the halter; the channel of communication between them was damned, or broken, by a thin and mocking ghost who walked at their sides.

It was a good six miles to Sloope, of unpleasant shaly road and little shade. The sun slid in and out of heavy banks of cloud that, rolling rapidly from the south, pressed downwards with their weight of rain. Over the distant hills hung, inverted, the silver fan of light that indicates a downpour. Jim cursed beneath his breath, for they were making straight into it, and his coat was not yet properly dry from yesterday's showers. The old shepherd's prophecy of red sky at morning was fulfilling itself, for the sun had risen in a boiling vat of blood, on whose surface the clouds curdled into ropes of gold.

The air was close and Jim was sweating; he

loosened the band of his shirt and cursed his dreary pilgrimage, as he stopped to allow the Pride to drink at the water-splash which crossed the lane. On impulse, he too flung himself down, and immersed his head in the crystal ripple, raising it, dripping, with the hair plastered over his eyes and a temporary sense of relief. He cursed again, but, this time, more good-temperedly, expending a fund of rural profanity on Tamar and her doings. The Pride watched him scornfully, as though he knew that in his own body lay more immortality than this petty guardian of his welfare could lay claim to. Jim swore at him again, and seized the bridle, and together they went on, conscious and resentful of each other, each step taking them nearer to Sloope and farther from Tod-market, for which the fair was bound. He seemed to see her, striding along beside the caravans, with her hands thrust into her pockets and her damnable head in the air ; and her slant eyes looking for a man that she could fool as she had fooled him. Slowly the vow shaped itself in his mind that he'd find her again, if he had to follow her to hell. He'd find her and make her pay for her treatment of him.

So when he saw her, standing ahead of him, at the side of the road, with a blade of grass stuck thoughtfully between her teeth, he believed that he was dreaming, and cursed himself, this time, for allowing his thoughts to be-fairy him.

She jerked her head at him from a distance, and came towards him with a negligent swagger. Forced at last to believe the evidence of his eyes, his limbs weakened and the pit of his stomach felt empty. She

approached him, her head on one side, as though she were trying to discover what there was about him that accounted for her presence there. He was so short, not young, and more than a little ridiculous, with his weak, drooping moustache and his pot-belly. Then it seemed to strike her that his real self was not centred in these foolish attributes, but in his small hot eyes, that glared at her with rage and love, and in the fiercely sprouting brows that set a black bar above them. With a gesture of strange temerity she lifted a finger and stroked his brows as he halted opposite to her.

"I thought maybe you'd gone another way and I'd missed you," she said, in almost a gentle voice.

Wave after wave of triumph consumed him. A slow, comprehending smile broke at the corners of his mouth. As though offended by it, she twisted away and stood slouchingly, with her shoulder towards him. He read in the attitude confession of his power over her. He looked quickly right and left along the road. It was empty, and on their left was a gate into a wooded meadow. He wondered if she had chosen that place for meeting him. The hedges were high. The Pride stepped sedately through the gate, when it was opened, as though approving the manœuvre. The heads of buttercup and scabious tapped against his enormous hooves, and gilded the silver fringes with their pollen, as he trod the deep lush grass, so grateful to the feet after the gritty high-road. Dew hung on every blade and stem, and the penetrating sweetness of crushed cowslips rose like incense behind their footprints. Where the meadow

dipped into a little coppice of blackthorn, carpeted with the frail snow of wood anemone, Jim tethered the Pride.

He lay looking up at the sky. He had forgotten Tamar. Time itself seemed to be suspended, ecstasy to prolong itself, and bliss become capable of infinite duration. From the moist earth beneath his shoulder-blades primeval content stole into his body. His soul swung to the rhythm of nature, was one with eternity, with the grass and the roots of trees.

She reminded him of herself by a sharp movement that drew his eyes to where she sat, witch-like, a little above him, with her arms clasped round her knees.

"I'm hungry," said Tamar.

He put his hand in his pocket, and found two slices of bread clapped together with cheese between them, and offered them to her, rolling over on his elbow to watch her eating them. She tore off great pieces with her strong teeth, holding the bread in both hands, and swallowed them ravenously ; he saw the convulsion of her thin brown throat, as the food passed down it.

"So you had to come after me, in the end." Male satisfaction spoke in the sentence. Her answer did not come immediately.

"I was sick of the fair." Her tone clothed the words in indifference and robbed them of coquetry ; it was impossible to doubt the sincerity of her reply. He glowered, for it was not the answer he had wanted. It seemed to rub the bloom off the immediate

past, to rob him of the fruits of his conquest. He would not have conquered her fully until he had brought her to acknowledge his power over her. The knowledge brought an acrid edge to his tenderness, an element of enmity into his love. He knew that while life remained he could never be rid of her ; but the last thing he desired just then was to be rid of her. That was the great, the ineluctable difference between his affair with her and his affairs with other women. No matter what enjoyment he had had from them, it was no sooner over than he was ready to pass on. The only woman from whom he had not passed on, up to the moment, was Ursula ; and that was a matter of tradition. She was his wife. None of his other loves had known waning, but a quick, total eclipse, hastened by the knowledge that life held many other such, towards whose untasted delights his desire drove him, while warm from the old embrace. But the first and most ominous knowledge that Tamar had brought to him was that the world henceforth contained but one woman, and even in the moment of possession he had trembled secretly with the dread of losing her, of knowing again, perhaps to eternity, the loneliness that had possessed him on the hillside above Clover.

"You'll have to buy me some new boots," she announced, turning the sole of her foot towards him, so that he saw the deep crack jagging across the leather, that gaped to display the earth-soiled flesh. "I can't walk far in these."

"I'll buy you some boots when we get to Sloope," he promised.

"With fine high heels and polished tops?" she prompted.

"A lot of good they'd be for walking the country lanes!" he taunted her. "How'd you like a pair of shoes the colour of my leggings?" He drew her attention proudly to them, blotched though they were with the wet grass. "Like horse chestnuts," he added, wondering what had put the idea into his head. "They'd match the colour of your hair when the sun shines on it."

"Those would do," conceded Tamar. "Look, it's going to rain."

"Deng it," muttered Jim, getting up. "And I wanted to get the Pride under shelter before the shower came."

"You'll have to be sharp, then."

He sent her on before to see if there was anyone about to observe their emergence from the meadow; she nodded reassurance.

Before they got to Sloop the rain descended in long stinging shafts out of the heart of a black cloud that had piled itself overhead; it stung the romance out of both of them—there was nothing to do for a while but cower under the shelter of some thin trees that offered, if not actual protection, at least some mitigation of their plight. The blanket rolled across the Pride's withers was covered by a thin tarpaulin sheet, but Jim dared not avail himself of blanket nor tarpaulin, save to spread the latter out along the horse's back. He had refused to be burdened with the weight of his own oilskin, relying upon a spell of fine weather and on the protection of a couple of

old sacks, one of which he now offered to Tamar. She took it from him, but whereas one man with two sacks would have been adequately covered, their one sack apiece availed little against the malice of the rain. Manlike, he hunched and gloomed, while she stood upright, with her arms folded across her bosom, stoically accepting her lot. Her thin body, which had never known luxury, was hardened against the weathers, and if the fatal seeds were in her, as they were in the majority of her tribe, she knew nothing of them, or ignored them.

Yet within a quarter of an hour or more the sun had blazed out again ; the puddles of rain in the road were churned into milk and the hedgerows dripped, but the sky had cleared to a bright transparent blue.

The sight of the roofs of Sloope recalled Jim's mind to other matters. He glanced sidelong at Tamar, biting his moustache.

" You and me'd better not be seen going into the town together."

" What do you mean ? " she challenged.

" Well, maybe if I'm seen with a woman the word'll go back where I come from that I'm not seeing to my job properly," he mumbled. She smiled sneeringly at the thin excuse.

" It's a woman you're afraid of ! "

He tried to bluster his way out of it, but failed. There was a woman, a middle-aged, married termagant, who lay in wait for him each year, and watched him like a lynx to see that no others got near him.

She was the mistress of the Potter's Arms, where he and the Pride were to bait. Ordinarily Sloope was one of the bright spots of his journey : there he was sure of beer in plenty and a fine hot meal, served in the cosiness of its mistress's parlour, where, with no eyes to overlook—for she always contrived at the time of Jim's visits to send her weak little pliable husband on some errand that took him out of town for the day—one could enjoy more than the steaming plate of roast lamb, with succulent green peas drowned in mint sauce, and rich golden potatoes, that she set before him.

Hungry—for Tamar had deprived him of his provision for the road—his stomach craved towards the feast which he knew awaited him ; but he was not risking an encounter between Tamar and the landlady of the Potter's Arms. His eye scanned the road anxiously, for he knew her habit, which was to send out one of the stable-lads to see if the stallion was coming, and then to run back and warn her, so that she and her fare were ready to welcome him on his arrival. A fine shindy there would be if the news went back that he was dawdling with a girl on the road ! She was not to be hectored like the majority of women. And suddenly he found himself grudging the time that was to be spent with her. He only wanted to get his business over and rejoin Tamar.

He thrust his hand in his pocket persuasively.

" See, you, Tamar : wait here a while till you see me turn the corner down there by the toll-booth. Then you can come on after me and get yourself

some food and something to drink while I'm away from you. 'Twill be a fine way of wiling the time."

Somewhat to his surprise, she made no demur ; a second's swift suspicion crossed his mind that she intended to find other ways of amusing herself, and the blood mounted to his face. " And keep me in your mind, or I'll have something to say to you when I come back."

" Are you going to give me the money for the boots ? " she asked laconically.

" Ay, if you'll give me your word you'll not be off with other chaps when I'm away," he threatened her.

" Eh, you men do think something of yourselves ! " she said wonderingly, and mocked him with her smile. " Why shouldn't I find a nice woman now, and the pair of us sit gossiping in the sun ? "

He laughed uneasily, handing her the money, but as the strokes of a clock came faintly to his ears, telling him it was noon, he bit his lip to think that it would be three at least before he could rejoin her. He began to tell her where she was to meet him.

" Spangle Oak's the next place we're making for. You'll follow the signpost out of the town, and when you've gone a bit—maybe half a mile—there's an old bridge across a stream." He did not tell her how long it would be before he met her there, thinking that she would leave Sloope the sooner. With another hurried glance along the road, he clipped her with his arm and thrust his mouth upon

hers. Hers was cold with rain, and frost-hard ; it made the act of kissing her a perilous adventure, as though a sudden diabolical bolt might pass through a man from her cold lips, tranfixing him on the spot. Jim shivered a little, for the contact had aroused his desire of her again ; but his duty drove him on the road. She stood with her hands hanging by her sides, watching him out of sight, with an enigmatical expression on her face.

With an eye alert for the landlady's messenger, he took the twisting street to the inn, strangely loth where once he had been eager, scratching his head beneath his cap for ways of shortening the time where once he had contrived to spin it out. He could hardly credit his senses when he learned that, for once, Fortune's fickle hand had spun the wheel in his favour. He learned at the back door of the old galleried inn that its mistress was away, that she had been carried to hospital twenty-four hours back, squealing like a stuck pig, with something wrong with her inside. His satisfaction spread itself in the inn kitchen, where, as an old acquaintance, he was invited to make himself at home. While his damp coat steamed before the fire, he bent eagerly over a steaming plate of stew, and, as time went on, began to imply with winks and jests at the scullerymaids that he had no fault to find with the exchange of circumstances. Having kissed one girl and tousled another, he rose, pulling down his waistcoat, and swaggered out for a breath of fresh air and a look at Sloope, a townlet as lovely as Clover had been

hideous, owing its prosperity to its situation in the heart of a hunting country.

A few smart cars stood in the market square, and a girl in a chrome yellow sweater and jodhpurs came down the street on a sedately stepping chestnut mare. Jim sized up the slim lines of steed and rider, and stole an upward knowing glance under his eyebrows ; at this distance from home he could afford to make eyes at the quality. She rode on, looking ahead of her, and Jim, untroubled by the rebuff, turned his attention to the shops, with their small sparkling windows and lively variety of goods.

Presently a window full of postcards caught his eye—the kind of thing that appealed to Jim : coloured pictures of men and girls, with pawky phrases printed underneath ; horses' heads—not so interesting ; and glazed coloured photographs. The sun streamed down the back of his neck ; he was full of good food ; Tamar was waiting for him at the bridge. He looked up, and saw the words *Post Office* painted above the door of the shop. He jingled the coins in his pocket, thrusting his snub nose nearer the glass. Presently he went in ; it was disappointing to find the shop in charge of a pimply youth, and it hastened his choice among the trays of cards displayed on the counter. Finally he picked out a highly glazed photograph of a basket of flowers, tinted, and frosted with tinsel ; he was taken aback on being asked threepence for this chaste production, having believed that all postcards were a penny. However, he pushed the coins across the counter, and carried

the card to a ledge, where an exhausted scrap of blotting-paper and a crusted nib invited purchasers to make use of them.

With the pen suspended over the card, he halted for a moment, to wonder what on earth had come over him. He had never done such a thing before in his life. Suddenly he flung down the pen. Supposing the arrival of a postcard from him put notions into Ursula's head? Women were so queer, you never knew where you had them. In all the years they had lived together she had never had a written line from him—not even in the days when the fact of possessing her had still power to stir him to excitement. And, now that she had slipped into the background of his life, he was writing to her! He reflected that the sun, and the good meal he had just eaten, and the beer, and the joy of Tamar, had driven him crazy. He was on the point of tearing the postcard up, when he remembered that it had cost him threepence, and that one did not waste money in that way. Ursula would stick it up on the mantelpiece for the neighbours to stare at—as well they might. There weren't many chaps in Aumbury who made a habit of sending threepenny postcards to their wives. He looked cautiously to see if the price was marked anywhere, and was disappointed to find that it was not.

To avoid further speculation, he hastily scrawled the address, added the legend, "Hoping this finds you well"—there was no need to add "as it leaves me," for she would know he never ailed, and orthography was a troublesome art that cramped a

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man's unaccustomed hand. He bought a penny stamp and stuck it on awry. As the card dropped into the letter-box he cocked his cap over his left ear, and returned towards the inn, conscious of virtue.

CHAPTER VII

TAMAR had bought a pair of red shoes. She had had the time of her life in the boot shop, for it was the first time in her twenty-eight years that she had been inside such a place. As a child she had gone barefoot ; later she followed the example of other women in replenishing her wardrobe from the barrows of the second-hand dealers who displayed their sorry ware in mean streets of the towns through which they travelled.

She too had eaten, crouched over an oilcloth-spread table in a carters' eating-house, gnawing the food she had ordered like a famished animal, keeping at bay by the ferocity of her sidelong glance the attentions of other customers. She did not do this on Jim's account, but on her own ; she had had enough, for the present, of men, and her mind was full of nothing but herself : of the hollow under her lower ribs, that gradually plumped itself out with the food she was swallowing ; of a thorn in her heel, and of the clammy touch of the damp clothing against her body. The hot tea which she swallowed from an earthenware mug circulated its warmth through her chilled limbs, and she hastened over the meal, so that she might get out into the hot midday sun, whose heat was for rich and poor alike.

On discovering the boot shop she had sauntered

into it, insolently aware of the suspicious glances of the assistant who hastened forward, not to serve but to dismiss her. They had plenty of gipsies along that street, and there was no end to their begging. Her look cut across his path like a knife, held him at bay. As he hesitated, shifting his feet, in front of her, she said, on the hoarse note to which her voice fell when she spoke quietly :

“ I want to buy some boots.”

She saw the suspicion in his eyes deepen ; her hand swung suddenly out of her pocket and scattered silver pieces in a demilune upon the thick fawn pile of the carpet. It was an incredible gesture, the gesture of an empress. The attendant looked stupidly down at the winking silver ; there was only a little over five shillings there, but it looked a lot, broken into sixpences and threepenny bits. She had changed the two half-crowns and the shilling that Jim had given her, because she wanted to feel the weight of money in her pockets. She laughed harshly.

“ Now will you show me some boots ? ”

His expression showed that he was stunned, as he moved towards the piled-up boxes on the shelves. She smiled to herself, knowing that he had been too taken aback to count the money, as she walked to a chair and seated herself. The money continued to lie there, gleaming, as he came towards her, stupefied into respect, with boxes in his hands.

She sat there for the best part of an hour. It was the slack time, and the shop was empty ; apparently the other attendants—if there were any—had

gone to their dinners. She sat there, savouring the unknown delight of having him kneel to her, the top of his oiled head on a level with her hands : kneeling on the silver—the sixpennies and the three-pennies, slipping now one and now another pair of shoes over her bare feet, which she had taken the precaution to wash in the wet grass, drying them on her skirt, before she came into the village.

“ Is that all you’ve got ? ” said Tamar, when she had tried on black boots, brown boots, and fawn boots : boots with buttons and boots with laces ; fine lacquered leather boots and suède boots with the velvety bloom of grapes ; smart buckled shoes with high heels, and shoes with higher heels that were little more than a collection of strips and straps.

He rose sullenly to go to the shelves once more ; the spell was passing from him and he had had time to count the money. The idea even struck him that these, perhaps, were counterfeit coins, and that she was having him on. Surreptitiously, under cover of a box lid, he picked up a sixpenny and bit it ; well, it had the authentic tang of silver, and he had better be careful, for the owner of the shop might come in at any minute, and he did not like it when customers were allowed to leave without making a purchase.

Then, woman-like, Tamar saw the pair of shoes she wanted. They were evidently not thought worthy of the show-case, for they hung by a string, with their counterparts, just outside the door. A pair of those cheap, pseudo-Egyptian sandals that Society fancied for an hour and rejected as soon as it was discovered how cheaply they could be copied and

sold in the Oxford Street shops to typists and shop girls. Even at Sloope their price was only four-and-eleven ; receiving them from the disgusted hand of the attendant, Tamar pored ecstatically over their perforations and imitation thonging. Red as a holly-berry they were, and her hardened soles did not perceive the unevenness in their paper linings. She waited for his reluctant fingers to fasten the straps, and stood up.

“ I'll take them. And there's fourpence change for you to give me.”

With a smile in her narrow eyes, she watched him grovelling for the money. Her dress had left a damp patch on the leather seat of the chair. His face was crimson as he counted out the coppers into her hand with sardonic deliberation.

She strolled out into the sun, leaving behind her the old broken boots which she had royally disregarded during the fitting. She felt as though she were shod with flame, as though her shoes would bear her over mountain tops.

Beyond the village rose the wooded heights across which they must travel to Spangle Oak. She had a fair idea of the road, and knew where to find the bridge, for the caravans had crossed it on their way to Clover. Sauntering, it would take her perhaps half an hour to reach it. The sun drew the moisture out of her clothes in steam and sent a million minute needles of warmth into her shoulder-blades. The cobbled street broke into the chalky softness of the country lane, as she mounted into the shadow of the trees.

Here was the bridge : hung roughly across the bed of a stream that carved itself deeply under rocky ledges, tumbling downwards to its ultimate destination, the flour-mill down in the valley. She hung over the sun-warmed parapet, looking at the smooth turfy slope from which the trees stood back, a basking-place for butterflies. Two burnet moths whirled into a courtship before her eyes, their individual blacks and whites merging into a dazzle of tremulous wings.

She swung herself down by her hands, and allowed herself to drop on the sunlit slope ; the sun and the raking lie of the land had drained the moisture away, the short sparse turf, meagrely disposed upon its rocky foundation, felt dry as tinder to her hand. A thorn-bush sheltered her from observation from the bridge.

She stripped off her clothes—there was nothing but the skirt and cardigan and a rag of cotton vest—and spread them out to dry ; then stretched herself in the sun, with nothing on but her red shoes, inviting Apollo with her clear carved ribs, her narrow bony thighs and immature starved breasts. Her only richness was the hair which she had loosed from the rain-soaked ribbon.

It was thus that Jim found her. Arriving at the bridge, to find it untenanted, he had known first a sickening pang of doubt, and then had caught sight of the edge of her black skirt spread on the slope below. He had shouted to her, but, asleep, she had not heard him. Fearing calamity, he had tethered the Pride to an overhanging tree and

prepared to follow her. The noise he made, clumsily landing on the rocky shelf from the bridge above, had wakened her, and he came on her, sitting up, naked as a wood witch, with her legs gathered under her, ready to spring.

The blood surged up into his head at the sight of her nakedness, and he plunged towards her ; but with a movement quick as lightning she snatched something from the grass by her side and held it towards him. He checked himself, nonplussed, curious to see what she was holding.

The sun ran along the blade of his own knife that she had taken from him. He laughed uneasily.

"That's a queer way to greet a fellow."

"You'll see how queer it can be if you lay hand on me," she promised him.

"Why, what'll you do?" He was afraid of her, but tried to sound jocular.

She made him understand, crudely, that, so far as women went, he would be done for, if he took her against her will. He stood gaping, dumbfounded. He could not understand that she could love him one hour of the day, and not at another. In all his hurried wanderings you took a girl when you could find her, thinking only of extracting as much pleasure as possible out of the fleeting hour. Then he remembered that his association with Tamar was not to be fleeting ; that they were going on together—on and on, until—— His thoughts met a blank wall, and refused to struggle further ; but he felt comforted. He laughed a little, and dropped on the grass ; thinking that she was a fine mettlesome creature

and worth his taming. He would keep these misgivings of his at bay—he was a fine one to have misgivings where women were concerned ! Besides, hadn't she let him take her already ? If that didn't prove that he was her master, what would ? He thrust that chilling recognition of something withheld into the background of his thoughts.

Paying no further attention to him, she began to put on her clothes. She brought to this business the calm and undisturbed concentration that she had brought to the knotting of the green ribbon ; she seemed by some occult means to surround herself with privacy, a privacy rooted, not in modesty, but in the feminine instinct to keep the processes of her toilet to herself. She kept her feet, with the red shoes, concealed under her, until Jim, lying at a distance, offered her the iron comb which Ursula had slipped into his waistcoat pocket. She rose incautiously to receive it from him, and he cried out at her :

“ God dang it, what have you got on your feet ? ”

Defiantly she displayed her purchase to him ; he scowled to begin with, but, chewing a blade of grass, could not refrain from laughing in the end.

“ Ay, they're bonny ; and I see you're peacock proud of them ! ” If Annie or Fenny had worn such a pair he would have thrust them on the fire. “ But, dang it, what good's the like of them for tramping the lanes ? ”

“ Maybe I'll ride the white horse,” she retorted, tossing her head.

“ Ay, maybe you won't,” growled Jim, thinking of the Pride.

She went down on her knees, and began to comb out the tangles of her hair. The red-brown halo flew out around her head and fell over her face in a veil through which her slant eyes watched him like the eyes of a witch.

"Tell me about yourself, Tamar."

"My daddy was a prince and my mammy a goose-girl," she chanted derisively.

"Give over your nonsense!"

"How do you know it's nonsense?"

"Princes' ba'rns don't walk the roads in a pair of broken boots," he retorted.

"Nay, they wear fine red shoes." Her wit ran ahead of his. "I don't know aught about my daddy or my mammy, so that tale's as good as any."

"Who reared you?"

"The show folk, I reckon; all between them. I was in a circus once," she boasted.

"Walking ropes and that lot?" Jim's eye lightened with rustic interest.

"That sort of thing," she answered evasively. She would not inform him that her share of the business had been to hand coloured balls and plates to a juggler. She had left the circus because she proved herself incapable of being trained in the simplest tricks of the trade. She had tried to ride bareback, and had broken her leg; attempted a juggling trick with a candle, and burnt half her hair off. It had been a sorry experience; its humiliations were bitten into her soul.

"Are you wed?" he asked fiercely.

"Do you see a ring on my hand?" she sneered,

thrusting out her brown, bony fingers for his inspection.

He looked at her under his lashes—longer and darker than her own. He was glad she was poor, homeless, and without companion, for, deep within him, although wholly unconscious, was the pride of the peasant who can trace back his forbears for seven, eight, perhaps a dozen generations : who can look upon a certain plot of ground, knowing that it is fertilised by his ancestors : whose serfdom is as much of an honour to him as is an earldom to its holder. He shared the contempt of such people for the show-folks, whose lives are as grains of dust, whirled on the wind, who flourish like the prairie blossoms, without root, and have no stone or entablature to mark their passing. He gathered these things to his soul, comforted to know that they gave him superiority over her. He had need of such comfort, knowing beneath it all that such superiority was like a screen of straw before the dread force of that secret, mystic ascendancy of her soul above his own.

It became necessary to win from her some open acknowledgment of what he had done for her ; rolling over, he stretched out an arm and stroked her foot.

“ You’ve not known a fellow before that bought fine red shoes for you ! ”

“ There was a chap at Missenden,” she said reminiscently, “ He bought me a green glass necklet—like jewels from the king’s crown it was. Night and day I wore it—till that bitch stole it from me ! ” Her voice ended on a savage snarl.

"I could get you a necklet," urged Jim.

He saw the smile play like distant lightning over her wild face. She had finished combing her hair. He could hear the Pride, scraping with impatience in the broken stones at the edge of the road above them. He must be getting on : there was Spangle Oak, and then The Dallows to be served, before they settled for the night. But she had got to satisfy him first—if not his body, then his mind.

"Why can't you say you love a fellow?" he pleaded, holding her bare anklet above the scarlet strap.

"Deeds speak louder than words, don't they?" she teased him.

"You've just refused me," he muttered.

"Ay," she admitted. "Ay. You see, it's this way." She bent her body over her folded arms and looked down into his eyes ; the regard of her own seemed to blend into a single shaft that plunged into his, he could feel it penetrating him, as though she herself, grown small, walked down the hollow passage made by the shaft into the dark depths of him ; it was pain, it was agony. "I'm not one for making love by daylight ; nor by any other kind of light. You don't want moon or stars for love, but a good, black night, with the clouds rolling overhead and the wind shrieking outside a closed door."

It was a new thought to him ; loving with him was such a simple matter that he had never given thought as to when or under what conditions it took place. Sun, moon, or stars, fire or candlelight, a man could love if the wish was in him : as he

could eat, or sleep, or groom a horse. He had no words in which to express this conviction, so he shrugged his shoulders and got up. She followed him and watched while he unknotted the Pride's halter, presently laying her hand without fear upon the Pride's white neck. "Take care," muttered Jim ; but the great white horse stood still : she was a female creature. His eye rolled tenderly upon her, and a whinny trembled in his throat. She laughed softly. "Ay, you and me'll be friends," she whispered. Jim heard the words, and again a faint uneasiness stirred within him ; as though he sensed a partnership in which he had no share. His mind harked back to Tamar and what she owed to him.

" 'Tis a poor, poverty-struck way of living, I'm thinking, following the shows," he began, as they stepped out on the road. He would feel better if he could make her admit it.

"It's not so dull as mouldering away in a village, like an old acorn fallen from a tree," she retorted.

"What—living in a rabbit-hutch on wheels !" he jeered. "Drawn by them bags o' bones you call horses ! Jog-trot day in and day out, and never a Christian bed to lay your body in ! Think now, if you'd got a snug home of your own, with a row of hives and a pear-tree"—without realising it he described his own home—"wouldn't you be glad to leave your old hutch-on-wheels and settle down the way a woman should ?"

"'Twould all depend," she answered cunningly, "who was sharing the pear-tree with me."

"And suppose it was me?" he pressed recklessly.

"Suppose pigs had wings!" But there was a sharpness not altogether of raillery in her voice. Unlike the majority of show-folk, she had little love for the road; she accepted it because no one had ever offered her the alternative, but she had none of the gipsy horror of house-dwelling that so many followers of the road profess. As an alternative to the sour drudgery of the little down-and-out fair she would have accepted almost anything—save work—that offered, so long as the offer was a sound one. She looked at him sidelong, wondering if there was anything to hope: and Jim wondered what possessed him to talk that way with her—he had never done it with any woman before. It was a symbol of the position of permanency which she had taken up in his life: yet common sense told him that it was but idle talk, and unfair to Tamar, if she took it seriously.

"I suppose that chap with the coconuts——" he began, and broke off.

"One has to eat and cover one's body," she answered simply.

"Have you nought of your own?" he demanded, pity overwhelming the more ignoble scorn he felt for her way of living.

There was no need to be jealous of the chap with the coconuts—had she not left him to come to Jim? She said, arching her insteps in the red shoes and looking down at them:

"Oh, sometimes I earn a copper or two my own way."

"And how's that?" He had a savage desire to make her confess to him the men she had lain with, the men she had fooled as she fooled him.

"Not the way you think," she flung back at him. "That's another affair. Oh, I make up physic sometimes for country girls——"

"Do you mean you doctor folk?" he scoffed.

"Oh, ay, when they ask me," was her airy answer. He looked at her curiously.

"Men and women?"

"Women, mostly."

"And what do women come to you for?" he taunted, with his head on one side.

"Now one thing and now the other—mostly it's the other," she mocked him. "Have you finished with your questions?"

"You'll be getting yourself in trouble," he told her uneasily.

"Ay; that's what a girl over to Archover told me." The name of Archover reminded him unpleasantly of Mildred, and he scowled and kicked a pebble in front of him; he scared the thought with a jest.

"Then if I get sick you'll have to physic me!" On the heels of the jest an even more disturbing thought darted into his mind. A fearful thought. She looked capable of poisoning a chap if he fell out with her.

She looked at him slowly.

"Ay, I'll physic you. But it won't be that sort of physic you'll need!"

He laughed, throwing back his head so that the sun struck across the reddened skin of his throat. She echoed him eerily.

"Nor'll you be wanting it," he told her cunningly, "if true love comes to you and me."

His little eyes glinted over her : the old desire burgeoned again in his heart, whipping his vanity. Once more he saw himself father of a son, a tall, rake-hell strip of a fellow, brave as he was lacking in bravery, insolent as he lacked courage for insolence : a chap that kept others in their places, and beat them at whatever he did. Coconuts ? He'd whip them off like dandelion heads ; he'd pile dart upon dart in the very centre of the board ; he'd ride horses, instead of leading them, and show those lads of Halcutt's the way across the thickset, in spite of being their junior ; men would fear and women love this son of Devoke, whose father would bask in his reflected glory. One had only to look at Tamar to see that she was made to be the mother of sons. To them she would impart her own harsh fibre, her carelessness of heat or cold, her independence, her secret wisdom, as well as her long, well-knitted limbs and the wary tilt of her wild head.

Jim gave a sudden shout, and slapped the Pride unexpectedly on his broad gleaming neck. The stallion started and pranced a little, but, glad of the opportunity to display his own cunning, Jim speedily mastered him, and the two looked at one another with a mutual approbation in their eyes. For a second he forgot Tamar, as he gazed into the

immutable ophidian eye of the Pride : a current of understanding and rivalry passed between them, and power raced in the man's veins.

They went on light-heartedly, Tamar arching her insteps in the scarlet shoes.

CHAPTER VIII

ANNIE came bouncing home, to remind them that it was her birthday on the morrow, but she'd asked for the afternoon off to-day because there was a luncheon-party to-morrow, and it wouldn't be very convenient for cook. Ursula, who had a cake ready to send to her third daughter, made her welcome, and fell to dreaming a little over the days before Annie was born, the days of her babyhood, telling, as mothers will, the beads of a wild and healthy childhood, in a kind of after-glow that modified Annie's bad deeds into harmless mischief and her very ordinary childish achievements into brilliance ; but, like a nun coming from time to time upon the great bead of the Hail Mary, the thought most recurrent in her mind was the thought of Jim. Jim had always been fondest of Annie : taken more notice of her than of the rest of the girls : fussed her : laughed after chiding her : and indiscreetly boasted of her in her own hearing. Perhaps a little of Mildred's peevishness and some of Fenny's shyness were due to the way their father had spoiled Annie ; Prue did not seem affected by it, but Prue was an odd little stiff, concentrated person, whose thoughts were always of herself, and rarely directed upon others except for her own purposes.

"Wake up, mother !" Annie was crying, thumping

her shoulder gently. "I declare, you looked as if you'd gone to sleep! It's living with Fenny makes you so dozy. Time father came home!"

Fenny ceased her mouselike occupation of ironing clothes to frown at Annie. She had been much happier since Mildred and Annie went away from home; they had always made her uncomfortable with their titterings, their jokes and hints behind Ursula's back, their ceaseless preoccupation with the thought of men. It was impossible not to think of men when Mildred and Annie were about. During the last few days with her mother she had been almost completely happy; the absence of her father had been like a weight removed from her chest, like the chaining up of a black dog that lurked always behind a door, ready to leap out and snap at her legs. She detested her father, dreaded his coarse jests and the way he mocked at what he called her creeping ways. Sometimes, she was sure, he went out of his way to say things before her—things that Ursula would not have said, although she too pricked her daughter's sensibilities at times. The only place where she knew real peace, thought Fenny, was at Miss Blandford's, but it had been nearly as good as being at Green Gates during this week at home. Now Annie had come to bounce and break things up, as she always did when she was about: and, since Mildred was not available, she would try to catch Fenny alone in the scullery and impart giggling information to her that Ursula was not supposed to hear.

Annie was neither an evil nor a foul-minded girl;

she was merely her father's daughter, in that all her life clustered about a certain thing which seemed to her of supreme interest and importance. She could no more see shame in human coupling than she could see it when the cock jumped on top of the hen—a sight that always made Fenny sicken and turn her head away. Where Fenny was morbid and introspective, she was lusty, and to her the jokes about the human body were the best jokes, and learning about the human body was the best learning. With a different type of education, Annie would have worked off all her interest in sex as a medical student. She was warm ; she could be tender and loving to all who made claim on her affections ; she was fond of both her parents, although a little fonder of Ursula than of Jim. She respected Ursula, while for Jim she had a knowing kind of affection ; she guessed pretty well what her father was, but she would never have wounded Ursula, as Mildred had done, by speaking of it. For Fenny she had a friendly contempt, and with Prue she was frankly at enmity, as she was with all things that were hard, heartless, and lacking in sympathy.

It seemed to her to-day that Ursula was a little dim, a little out of conceit with herself, and, putting it down to her father's absence, set herself to dispel Ursula's wistfulness.

" Listen to this, both of you : I've got a fine piece of news for you ! " she announced exultantly.

" You've not won the crossword ? " wondered Ursula.

Annie threw back her thick, creamy throat and roared with laughter. Fenny's brows drew together ; there was something so fleshly, so coarse in Annie's laughter.

" If I'd done that you'd have seen me riding up here in a coach with six white horses, instead of trudging on my own two pins ! " she replied. " You'll not guess if I give you twenty, so I'll tell you. I'm going to be the May Queen at Bramble on Wednesday next week ! "

The two women stared : Ursula's mouth broke into a smile, dropped into regret. How pleased Jim would be ! What a shame he would miss it, as he was not coming back until Thursday ! Her busy mind began to weave like a shuttle, conjuring impossibilities : the May procession would be put off, Jim would come home a day earlier than he had said he would——

" I thought Emily Dagg was to be the May Queen ? " asked Fenny.

" Emily's gone sick with the mumps, and they've chose me to take her place. I'm to wear her clothes—and I've brought them home for you to alter, mother ! " Annie whisked a parcel from behind her back with the air of a conjuring trick. " Mrs. Dagg's been ever so nice about it, and she says you can alter them as you like, so long's you don't cut the stuff. It'll want letting out under the arms—Emily's not got nearly so much chest as I have ! "

There Annie went again ! Talking about her chest, a detestable part of her anatomy of which Fenny never thought when she could help it. She

always took care not to look in the glass when she was undressing, and hurried shamefacedly over her bath in the tin tub which was for her a weekly penance. Annie had once told her—heaven knows where she had got the information—that French girls in convents took their baths under a sheet. Thus the French became, to Fenny, a race of the most exquisite and refined sensibility. But feminine curiosity took her to the table, on which Annie had unfolded the May Queen's dress—a snow-drift of tucked and pleated muslin with inlets of Swiss embroidery.

“Mrs. Dagg's a good needlewoman,” Ursula approved, lifting a fold in her rough fingers. “I doubt I'll not be able to match her stitching.”

“Oh, just cobble it up anyhow, ma,” said Annie light-heartedly. “The stitches won't show, so long's I don't split the seams ! Shan't I look dandy ? I've not seen the robe and crown yet—Mrs. Boswell, the parson's wife, is getting them—but they're to be purple velvet and gold—think of that ! How about me in purple velvet with a gold crown ? I can't help laughing to think how dad would roar if he saw me !”

“It's a rare shame he won't see you,” answered Ursula. “I'll do the best I can ; it's to be hoped that finery doesn't come to grief while it's here. I'd rather you'd sent for me to sew it over at Bramble. You never saw such a fall of soot we had the other day, and, though Fenny and I did our best to clean it up, I wouldn't take my word there's no smuts lying about in the corners. You'd better put it up

in Fenny's bedroom : she hasn't got a chimney, so it'll be safe there."

"It'll be all right in the paper, mother," said Annie. "Phew, isn't the sun lovely and hot? It makes me feel ready to burst myself, and then I come hot all over, thinking that it's as likely as not to be snowing next Wednesday, and weeks after, till Emily Dagg's got better from the mumps and she's the May Queen after all instead of me. Honest, ma, I think I'd take a dose of arsenic if that was to happen!"

"Don't say such things," reproved Ursula, intent upon the careful folding of the muslin gown. "And put the kettle on, Fenny : it's time we had a cup of tea."

"And my birthday cake!" Annie reminded her, with a grin. "Well, Fenny! What have you been doing to give the boys a treat since I last saw you?"

Fenny's face turned crimson ; she made an exclamation and went out of the room. Ursula shook her head at Annie.

"You didn't ought to tease her."

"Oh, go on, ma! A bit of teasing's good for everybody. I do declare, it's enough to make you wonder if she's flesh and blood at times. Tell us, ma : I'll bet you had plenty of fun with the boys when you were young?"

"Not so much as you've had," returned Ursula, going to the pantry to fetch the loaf, and wondering where Fenny had vanished. "My mother was very strict with me—maybe it's because I was the only

girl. I sometimes wonder if I've been strict enough with you and Mildred."

"I heard from Mildred yesterday," said Annie, creasing her brows.

"Did you? I made Fenny send her a card last night, to ask her to come over, if she's well enough, and give me a hand with the cleaning. I want to get the house done up and the walls whitewashed before your father comes back." Ursula went placidly about the business of laying the table. It was nice having Annie at home; she had been feeling dull and depressed—ever since that postcard came. She couldn't say why. Jim had never sent her a postcard before: it showed that he was thinking of her. But, somehow, the very unusualness of the proceeding had disturbed her, made her uneasy. It seemed to reveal a part of Jim that she had not known about before, and it upset her to think that there was something in Jim she had not known about. She wanted him to return, that she might reassure herself by sight and touch that he was the man she knew, not a stranger, who stood in strange post-offices, using strange pen and ink, to send postcards to her. Instead of bringing him nearer, it had set him at a distance greater than any that had existed between them before. Although the post-mark, that she had put on her glasses to study, said "Sloope," she could not think of him at Sloope, which was a place that she knew, but in some strange foreign town that her foot had never trod. It was such a pretty postcard, too: roses and chrysanthemums all packed into a wicker basket, with its handle tied up in a tinsel bow; but, instead of

putting it on the mantelpiece, she had thrust it away in the back of a drawer in the dresser, hoping that way to forget it ; only during the last few hours it had proved so impossible to forget that she had been tempted to bring it out and set it on the mantelpiece after all, to see if it would be better that way. And she had hoped at first that Fenny, who had taken it from the postman, would not mention it to Annie ; but now she had begun to think of telling Annie about it—not to ask her opinion of it, but to see whether telling someone about it would help to get it off her mind.

These thoughts so occupied her that she did not notice the silence that intervened before Annie said, in a stiff voice :

“ Mother, I think there’s something you ought to know about Mildred.”

Ursula smiled to herself, thinking how odd it was that she should have news of Mildred’s child from Annie, and not from Mildred herself.

“ Maybe I know it already,” she answered. “ I don’t need twenty guesses this time.”

“ No, you don’t, mother,” returned Annie. “ I didn’t mean to tell you, but now I think, perhaps, I’d better. There’s no knowing what’ll happen. Well, it’s just this. Mildred wasn’t feeling so well—so she got some physic from a woman in Archover, and it’s made her worse. She’s right down sick, mother ; that’s all there is to it.”

For all her country-born innocence—and Ursula was a great deal more innocent than any of her daughters, except Fenny—she could make a pretty

shrewd guess as to what "getting physic from a woman in Archover" meant. The bread-knife dropped from her hand ; she stood looking at Annie, the colour draining away from her face. At that moment she looked, not ten, but twenty or thirty years more than her age. Through all those fourteen journeys which led her so near the gates of death she had borne undimmed the torch of her vast and formless belief in the nobility of bearing children. The thought of tampering with the mystic process horrified her in the roots of her being ; it was to her the blasphemy of blasphemies. The thought of a daughter of hers performing the sacrilegious act was like a drop of corrosive acid poured into the alembic wherein her own love for her husband was distilled : the wine turned to poison, scorched, choked, suffocated her. Unconsciously she put her hand up to her throat ; her forehead had turned crimson and the veins in her temples were throbbing.

"Don't take it like that, ma," said Annie uneasily. She came to put her arm round her mother's shoulders. "Lots of girls do it nowadays, you know ; there aren't many folks that can afford to have children, since the war."

As though she had not heard her, Ursula dropped into a chair and broke into hard, difficult weeping. It was many years since she had wept. She wept now for Mildred's betrayal of herself, no less than of the child within her womb ; she wept because, at the knowledge that Mildred was with child, the hopes that no longer could centre in herself had leapt wildly into conflagration after their long slumber.

Her whole being had spired upward in the prayer that in a grandson Jim might forget the long disappointment of his own life.

Annie knelt beside her, trying to soothe her.

"There, there, ma ; don't take it like that. I wish to goodness I hadn't told you—only I thought I'd better—in case anything happened to Mildred. You'll see—she'll—she'll be all right after all," muttered Annie, in the fatuous attempt to undo the effect of her own words.

"I must go over on the evening bus," whispered Ursula.

"No, you can't do that, ma, because there isn't another to bring you back. And anyhow you'd better not ; they'll let us know if she gets worse—but she's trying to keep it quiet from Jack, and you know what you are, ma ! You never can keep a secret—your face gives you away every time ! Jack would guess what was up the minute you got your nose inside the door, and then there'd be a fine hullabaloo, and between the pair of you you'd make Mildred worse than ever."

There was so much common sense in what Annie said that Ursula tried to check her sobbing, and fumbled for her handkerchief.

"Here's mine, ma—see, isn't it a saucy one, with them girls in bathing-suits all round the edge ? I got it out of the bran-tub at the Vicarage sale of work," said Annie, tenderly drying her mother's eyes. She dropped a kiss on the end of Ursula's nose. "Poor old lady ! Who'd have daughters, eh ? I hope to goodness I don't have any. I wouldn't mind a round

dozen of boys, but I'd just draw the line at one girl."

She jumped up, pretending to groan as she straightened her knees.

"We're none of us as young as we was!" she said, in ludicrous parody of her father. "Come on, ma—cheer up! A nice sort of birthday-party you're giving me. Go and give your face a wash and I'll mash the tea and call Fenny—then I'll tell you both all about the way Tom Lustard's courting the under housemaid! It's enough to make a cat split its sides."

"Tell me, Annie," said Ursula, detaining her, "just *how* sick is Mildred?"

"She's not in bed," returned Annie, understanding her. "Because if she went to bed Jim would soon smell a rat. She's going about doing as much of her work as she can, but she says she has awful pains sometimes—they seem to cut her in pieces. She's fainted once or twice—when Jack wasn't there. But Mrs. Icklepin next door lent her the money to get a bottle of brandy, and she says that helps a bit. In fact, she said in her letter she wasn't so bad the day she wrote, and thought maybe it was clearing off—and I don't know what on earth made me tell you," concluded Annie, "only the things you read in the papers makes you a bit jumpy—when it's your own sister, and all that."

"Maybe I'd better get over, after all," reflected Ursula. "I could spend the night in a chair——"

"And leave Fenny alone here? You'd come back in the morning to find her batty as a March hare! You know what she's like when she's left by herself in the evenings," said Annie scornfully. "Just you

leave it alone, mother—till to-morrow at any rate ; and maybe you'll have a letter from Mildred, though I shouldn't think she's likely to come over and help you with the cleaning."

She went to the door and called Fenny, but there was no reply.

Fenny had slipped into the church. It was just round the end of the fence that enclosed the Devokes' garden ; then you went through a white-painted stile and were in the churchyard itself, across which passed the right-of-way that connected the northern with the southern part of the village.

During the last day or two she had taken a fancy for creeping into the church when it was emptied ; she derived a sensuous pleasure from the crypt-coldness of the low Norman arches, the indescribable church-smell that revolts the healthy minded with its message of corruption, the creaking of its ancient pews, the uncertain shafts of light that fell, dust-laden, from the windows deep-set in walls that seemed to Fenny old as eternity itself. She enjoyed the sensation of allowing the heavy leather curtain that hung over the door to fall behind her : of tip-toeing down the aisles over the flat tombstones that struck cold through the soles of her shoes, to kneel at last on a crimson hassock, clasping her hands very tightly and looking up at the altar, with its lace-edged cloth, its two carved candlesticks and plain brass cross. This was for Fenny an inimitable moment, a moment when the soul separated itself from the body in an ecstasy of anticipation. It was almost

immediately followed by a sense of anti-climax, as though the whole thing consisted in the tiptoe entrance, the act of doubling one's body between the seat and the book-rest of a pew, the contact of one's knees with the rough hassock. When that was over—after that first ecstatic minute—one was left deliberately feeling holy, conscious of the most absurd and trivial things—a moth crawling out of a hymn-book, the drag of one's skirt under one's knee, a safety-pin that had evidently come unfastened, and scratched one in a wholly inaccessible part of one's back.

In spite of these things, Fenny had an idea that, if one persevered, one would reach some state wherein, presumably, moths and safety-pins no longer worried one with their existence.

She chose for these meditations of hers a corner of the church known as the Children's Chapel, to which the schoolchildren were encouraged to bring bunches of wild flowers, coloured pictures (of a religious nature), and texts which they printed in Sunday-school, and which were arranged on a ledge across one corner. There was also on the ledge a small plaster St. Christopher and, rather inexplicably, a shell-case from Mons. The Rector, who was rather evangelistic in his ideas, had rejected a small and exquisite Madonna which the Slades' little girl had offered, but for his own inscrutable reasons had accepted the shell-case. A few of the smaller children, getting confused between the St. Christopher and the shell-case, chose to say their prayers to the latter, since it was shining and simple and satisfied their ideas of the beautiful. The Rector, who had no idea

of the children saying their prayers to either, because images were to him Romish and therefore abominable, sometimes held forth on the sin and horror of war, pointing to the shell-case as an example : and the small boys, lulled by the droning of the Rector's voice, nodded on the chairs and dreamed that they were grown up and that there was another grand war on and they were having the time of their lives bombarding their enemies with beautiful shining shell-cases, just like the one on the ledge.

Fenny chose the Children's Chapel because she knew that, in the opinion of the Church, childhood was synonymous with purity. She did not stop to remember whether her childhood and those of her sisters had been remarkable for their purity ; she was content to kneel there, feeling pure. That was how nuns felt, she reflected ; by kneeling in the Children's Chapel and feeling pure one was by some means advancing oneself towards the condition of a nun.

The notion of being a nun, which had now taken possession of her whole mind, was not a matter of gradual growth or consideration ; as a matter of fact, it had never entered her head until the morning when Ursula had asked her, half teasingly, if she did not get married, what she meant to be. The words " A nun " had shaped themselves on her lips without the slightest volition on her part ; as one may fling back any thoughtless retort to a person who teases one. It was only on thinking them over afterwards that she became convinced that, all unwittingly, she

had voiced the complete solution of her problem. The very thoughtlessness with which she had spoken seemed to Fenny a sign of vocation. She had learnt at school about angel voices speaking to the French saint, Joan of Arc ; and it did not take her long to arrive at the conclusion that an angel had spoken through her lips to tell her mother that she was going to become a nun.

She was a little worried over the difficulties of becoming a nun if one was not a Roman Catholic ; but she persuaded herself that, as matters arranged themselves for Joan of Arc, so they would arrange themselves for her. Perhaps a priest would come to the village, and take her away with him to a convent — She did not trouble to pursue the fantasy very far. She preferred to dwell upon the state of being actually a nun—a state which meant to her the elimination of everything that she found unbearable in her present existence.

First and foremost, the elimination of bodies—her own and other people's. Draped in robes of pearly white (she chose these in preference to the more serviceable black), bodies ceased to have significance ; there was nothing to see or to be seen. Vaguely she surmised, moreover, the abolition of all the unpleasant functions of the body : such things, having no part in the life of purity, must of themselves atrophy, and, in time, vanish. Darting from this point, her unbalanced mind next contemplated the elimination of men. Sealed in the convent walls as a nut within its shell, no male should invade her fastness ; and with the exclusion of men went the

exclusion of all the abominations that men stood for : all the lewd, half-comprehended jests that made her shudder in the dusk, all lads whistling down dark lanes and sniggering at girls' legs, all kissing in hedgerows and rustling in barns, all the obscene spectacle of courtship, all marriage and childbirth.

The convent, to Fenny, was a vast garden, where white-robed nuns drifted about, possibly carrying lilies, and smiling sweetly at one another, and where she herself—oh, vital stipulation !—was the favourite nun of the head nun, whose face was like——

At this point Fenny's meditations usually ended with a rush, and she became conscious of a soreness in her knees, and, getting up, she first genuflected scrupulously towards the altar—a thing which she had found out nuns invariably did—and then tiptoed again out of church. It was a pity the Rector never found her doing so ; he would have been much gratified, for the villagers of Aumbury were, on the whole, hard-boiled in their attitude to church-going, save at the conventional times—for which the Rector was inclined to blame the sorry example of the visitors, who were never known (with the exception of the youthful Andra Slade, who, coming of atheistic parents, found church great fun) to set foot across the church's threshold. He would have been less gratified had he known the trend of Fenny's thoughts, which, being a man of small intelligence and less psychological experience, he would probably have taken more seriously than they deserved.

At all events, Fenny herself took them seriously,

and had adopted the church as a refuge, remembering it thankfully when Annie began to tease her.

She knelt there as long as she could—in fact, until the pain in her knees and thighs became unendurable ; then, reflecting that there could not now be much more than an hour before Annie had to leave to catch her bus, and that Ursula would wonder, and perhaps question her inconveniently, if she did not return, she lifted the leather curtain, and passed, blinking, out into the mellow light of the churchyard.

The first person she saw, when her eyes had accustomed themselves to the brightness, was Miss Blandford.

Miss Blandford was using the right-of-way ; she was walking with head bent and her hands clasped behind her ; the walking-stick, which she always carried, trailed behind her, making a little scraping accompaniment of sound to her footsteps. These footsteps sounded to Fenny unlike Miss Blandford's usual brisk and decisive tread ; they seemed heavy, almost despondent, as though their owner just pushed one foot in front of the other, not much caring where they led her. She was wearing her usual gentlemanly tweed, derided by the Rector's wife (who went in for being feminine in "three-pieces" from Marshall's), and a battered but still worthy sporting felt that shaded her eyes from the sun.

She looked up with a start as Fenny's shadow fell across her path—Fenny having skipped three graves and a railing to reach the stile at the same time as Miss Blandford.

Her handsome, well-bred face had lost some of its healthy colour, and her eyes were slightly bloodshot, as though she had not been sleeping.

"Well, Fenny! What on earth are you doing among the tombs?"

Fenny smiled; she often did not answer when Miss Blandford asked her unanswerable questions. She felt very pure—much purer, even, than in the Children's Chapel. Looking at Miss Blandford, she seemed to see for an instant the tweed costume eclipsed beneath robes of white; she dismissed the vision, with a vague doubt in her mind as to whether they would be becoming to Miss Blandford.

"What have you been doing, Fenny?" persisted Miss Blandford, her eyes softening as they rested on the girlish figure.

"I've been in church, madam."

"In *church*? I didn't know you were religious."

"I don't know whether I am or not, madam," said Fenny, casting her eyes down demurely. Then once again the words shot out of her as they had done before, to Ursula. "I'm going to be a nun." This time she was aghast at the sound of them; what would Miss Blandford say to that? After a palpitating moment, she looked up and found Miss Blandford staring at her with an expression of such ludicrous astonishment that Fenny was embarrassed by it.

Without saying a word, Miss Blandford turned, and began to walk back across the churchyard. Fenny somehow understood she was expected to follow her; she did so, respectfully, a pace behind her employer.

"What's put that idea into your head?" asked Miss Blandford presently, in a low voice.

Fenny twisted her fingers together; this, indeed, was a question difficult to answer.

"There are three things that take women into convents," pursued Miss Blandford. "Failure, loneliness, and vocation. We can dismiss the first; you aren't old enough to have found out whether you are a failure or not. I shouldn't think you have the vocation. Is it——" She broke off, half afraid to follow the subject further. For she knew that she would have liked Fenny to have confessed to her that she was lonely; it would just about have put the lid on things, as far as Lovekin was concerned. Yet, infatuated as she knew herself to be, she could not quite make up her mind to the decisive step which should hurl Lovekin into outer darkness. Her infatuation had not yet quite blinded her to the demands of friendship or destroyed her sense of the ridiculous. If only it had gone so far as that she might have been completely happy.

Although suffering from the sentimental fluctuations which psycho-analysts often connect with her time of life, Miss Blandford came of robust stock. Her philanderings with Fenny had, up to this time, been carefully regulated by her recognition of the difference in their social positions: not from snobbery, but because she realised that unless she was prepared to do something very definite indeed—beneath which deliberate vagueness of statement was concealed her growing idea of adopting Fenny, having her educated to supplant Lovekin—it was

unfair to the girl to make too open a fuss of her.

She was also, under the rose, extremely miserable about Lovekin. She was not one to form close connections and then sever them lightly ; whatever terms existed now between her and Lovekin, their relationship had once been very much more than employer and employee. And although Lovekin's nonsense with the Slades—who, Miss Blandford had come to consider, were most vulgar and third-rate people—practically made it imperative to dismiss her, Miss Blandford could not help worrying over what was to become of Lovekin, who, trained for no profession, and having few qualifications of her own, would become dependent upon the charity of some well-meaning person, as once she had been on Miss Blandford's.

At the moment when she met Fenny, she had believed that she had arrived at a compromise : she would have a downright talk with Lovekin, and give her a fair opportunity of mending her ways, before taking the fatal step. Now it seemed as though she was to be rushed into action.

" Is it loneliness ? " she asked heavily.

Fenny blushed, wriggled, and nearly broke her fingers in embarrassment.

" It's just the beastliness of things," she faltered.

" What things ? "

" Things—life ! " blurted Fenny desperately. When she had said it, she closed her eyes ; she tasted for a moment the sensuous delights of the confessional. Now she was prepared to tell Miss Blandford anything—anything ! All about Annie

and Mildred and boys, and how she hated her father and dreaded his return.

Miss Blandford knitted her brows anxiously ; she felt that in not understanding Fenny immediately she was failing her. The thought made her quite desperate ; the first time the girl appealed to her directly—and she failed her ! Her hand clenched itself on the handle of her walking-stick.

She was herself extremely healthy about life. Like Ursula, she had no squeamishness, and Lovekin's gentility had often roused her mirth and drawn her into kindly sarcasm. She looked at Fenny apologetically.

" I don't quite see, Fenny——"

As Fenny began rapidly to explain, a dazzling light of understanding broke upon her ; for the first time she seemed to see the whole thing, and could have kicked herself (her favourite expression of self-recrimination) for not seeing it before. Of course, poor little thing ! The sufferings of an over-sensitised soul in bucolic surroundings. Anxious to show that she understood at last, she broke into Fenny's incoherencies with :

" All right, all right, my dear ! " She cleared her throat, holding out her hand to Fenny ; Fenny's thin, smooth fingers were swallowed in the strong, capacious clasp. " Trust me. I understand. I'll find a way out for you, without going into a convent."

Then she turned on her heel and strode away decisively. Fenny stood looking after her, feeling a little disappointed ; she would have liked to have gone on talking to Miss Blandford, to have told her

everything : to have voided that dark abyss of horror and conjecture that formed the core and centre of her life. She felt very much as an actor feels who has been cheated of his climax, and her brows knitted themselves in annoyance. She had never had anyone with whom to talk about " things," and, although she shrank from the confidences of Mildred and Annie, she was morbidly eager to confide in someone who would sympathise with her and minister to her own self-esteem. Shrewdly aware that Miss Blandford was prepared to look on her as a martyr, she was anxious to justify her martyrdom, and the opportunity, so aptly presented, might not occur for some time again.

As she walked frowningly homeward, her mind busied itself in plotting how she might bring it about : preferably in the house, in the evening, by firelight, with Miss Sherlock out. The frown melted from her brows as she walked swiftly on, rehearsing mentally her own sentences. . . .

CHAPTER IX

SHE SAT on a fence, swinging her heels in the red shoes, and describing, not for the first time, how she had dealt with the shop-assistant who had begun by flouting her. It was a tale she seemed not to tire of telling ; once again her arm went out in its inimitable gesture—" You should have seen his face when the silver lay there, in half a circle, like the sickle moon, and him in the middle of it—the man in the moon, and struck moon-mad at the sight of me ! " And the harsh laughter tore itself from her throat in gusts, as she rocked herself to and fro in exultation.

Jim laughed too—he roared as loudly as he was able, because there were things he wanted to drown in his laughter : the cruel note in her voice, which reminded him that he too might become the object of her cruelty. He laughed and rolled himself in the grass, watching her all the time, because she had bewitched his eyes as well as the rest of him, and he dared look at nothing else when she was about. She filled his eyes as she had filled his soul : her lean, jealous body thrust the rest away. In her he forgot everything—even the Pride, at times : even his own uneasy consciousness that between him and the stallion a rupture was pending. For, in the last few days, the Pride, instead of gentling, had

shown sly and vicious, as though he allied himself with Tamar and existed but to plague his servant.

Regular meals, dry bedding, and, perhaps, his love, had made another woman of Tamar already. They were three days past Sloope and the circle of their round had taken the homeward curve ; but they were held up at Aldmaston, because the Pride was taking a day's rest—perhaps more ; it would depend upon the veterinary surgeon, a friend of Captain Halcutt's, who had dropped in, in response to a telephone call from the Pride's owner, to have a look at the stallion, when they reached Aldmaston. His visit, which ordinarily Jim would have welcomed, was an occasion for some sullen apprehension on Jim's part : for the Pride made it evident, as soon as they visited his stall, that horse and man were on bad terms, and Jim wondered what report would go back to Brambledown. The Captain had his own ideas about relationships between men and beasts, and Jim's post at the stables would have been no sinecure, had not the horses liked him.

Aldmaston bookings were cancelled, which meant a loss of money : but such lapses were all in the day's work, and he had done well at Spangle Oak and Summerfold and was well in pocket, although not so well as he would have been had not Tamar been with him. Very occasionally the thought crossed his mind, like a dream, of how he was to account to Ursula for not bringing back the usual largesse of his wanderings ; but, like a dream, it passed. Man-like, he took the present for eternity.

Thin, drabble-tailed, and wretched when first he met her, her looks repaid him for all he had done for her. Hungry for a word of acknowledgment, he had tried once or twice to force it from her : seizing her by the nape of her neck and thrusting her head over mill-pond or horse-trough, that she might see her own reflection and mark the difference. But all he got was a laugh like an eagle's cry, and sometimes she would twist her head round and sink her teeth softly into his arm, looking up at him with eyes that glinted evilly between their slanting lids. The tan lay on her cheeks like the gloss on a brown egg, and her hair was lively as a banner. She was still thin as knives, and she still slouched along with her shoulder-blades ridging the back of her knitted coat into two sharp scimitars ; but she did this no longer from languor, but because it was a habit. He had cause to know the formidable strength that lay concealed in that so seemingly brittle body ; imperious as her refusals were her demands, and he had thought bitterly in the throes of his own exhaustion that she was capable of rousing a corpse to obtain what she desired.

Sometimes in the day-time he felt as though he were walking in his sleep ; every bone in his body seemed melted, and he had come dully to admit that she had bewitched him. Only the dogged determination to master her in the end accounted for his efforts to conceal his fatigue ; once, when she had left him to enter a village alone, a practice they had adopted as befitting prudence and convenience alike, he had stumbled into a field, hardly waiting

to tether the Pride before he fell on his face and went dead asleep.

He looked up at her, perched like a witch on her broomstick, astride the fence ; ay, she was laughing now, and in a good temper. It had not been that way the night before.

Out of sheer devilment she had pretended to be jealous of the Pride, maintaining that Jim paid the white horse more attention than he gave to herself. That in itself was an aggravation of Jim's already sombre mood, for, beside the visit of the veterinary, there had been a bit of trouble entering the town ; the Pride, taking exception to a steam-roller, had lunged suddenly on to the pavement, scattering the shrieking passers-by and smashing a poulterer's window. Tamar had laughed like a she-devil when she heard of it, and had stormed at him in the village street at night, when he had promised to take her to the pictures, and was late in joining her.

"You and your blasted horse ! I'm sick of the pair of you !"

He could have hit her ; he would not tell her of the grim scene that had taken place in the stall when he went to bed the Pride for the night ; of how he had been driven to the expedient of going in beside the stallion carrying a stake pointed with a nail, to keep the Pride from savaging him against the partition. He had never had to resort to such a thing before, and his own pride was as tender as a boil when she nagged at him for keeping her waiting.

They sat in acid silence while the film ran on ;

she would neither let him touch nor speak to her, even when he bought her a bar of chocolate and threw it on her knee. He heard the rustle of the paper as she unwrapped it, and saw the champing of her jaws, but her profile was like an iron mask. When they came out, she took up the quarrel again.

"So you'll keep me waiting, will you, while you groom your blasted horse?" Her teeth looked like fangs in the lamp-light.

"Maybe you'd like me to curry-comb you and pick the stones out of your hooves, same as the Pride? Maybe that would satisfy you?" he retorted, hoping to make her laugh.

She suddenly turned her face towards him, and there was a gleam of cunning in her eye.

"You'll do one thing, at any rate, before I bed with you to-night!" she flung at him.

"Ay, what's that?"

"You'll wash my feet the way you wash the feet of your blasted horse!"

"Well—if that's all you want!"

The cunning changed to triumph as she watched him handling a stable bucket, hunting round for a bit of old sponge, in the most matter-of-fact manner. Jim saw nothing symbolic in the deed which, to Tamar, was one more proof of her ascendancy over him. If she wanted her feet washed, why couldn't she have said so before? he wondered, as he footed a box forward for her to sit upon. He brought no particular tenderness to the business—Tamar's feet were not the part of her person that thrilled him.

But as he went on matter-of-factly slopping the water over her ankles, and picked up a bit of sacking on which to scrub them dry, she began to smile ; the next moment she was at her tricks again, and Jim, as he stumbled up the ladder to the loft, was like to lose his footing with the spinning of the blood in his head.

They were well-bestowed at Aldmaston. Instead of sleeping in the stable itself, which was small and malodorous, they were in the hay-loft above, with a trap-door at their side which looked down into the Pride's stall and kept Jim in observation of him.

An hour later, as she fondled him and crooned in the voice of which she contrived to make a caress in their moments of ecstasy, " My bonny lad ! Give me a black-browed lad ! " he wondered confusedly about women ; the queer things it took to change them from devils to angels. She wanted her feet washed. Well, he'd better make a practice of it in future. It was a cheap way of saving bother.

" We'd look well if we rolled down into the manger ! " whispered Tamar chuckling. " Right in the middle of the night, under the Pride's nose."

" Ay, there'd not be much left of us to pull out of the manger when he'd done with us," muttered Jim, frowning into the darkness as the humiliation of his past experience revived at her words.

" I'll show you what I'd do if he came for me," whispered Tamar.

A beam of moonlight fell, through a pane of glass in the roof, across their feet ; he watched her crawl

down into it, saw her sitting there, with her hair tumbled about her shoulders ; saw her drawing something out of her pocket, fumbling with it, and suddenly a streak of deadly blue moonlight along the thing in her hands. She lifted and poised it. " I'd drive it—so—first into one eye and then into the other ! "

Jim gave a grunt ; insensitive as he was to verbal brutality, he sickened at the picture her words conjured : of the Pride, plunging and bellowing, with scarlet streaming down that noble muzzle : a hideous, an obscene spectacle. He muttered uneasily :

" You'd better give that knife back to me."

She laughed, snapped the blade back and thrust it again into her pocket.

" 'Tis rare bad luck to give a knife ; they say it cuts love."

" Then hand it over ; I gave it you."

" Nay, you didn't ; you loaned it me to cut my ribbon, and I kept it. You can try and get it back, if you want ! "

Thus she invited him to tumble her, and Jim accepted the invitation, which was also a challenge ; but he did not get the knife, nor, presently, did he remember it. They wrestled in desperate silence on the straw.

The worst part of her was her refusal to let him have her during the day. She was implacable in her demands for darkness, and when a man has been walking from cocklight to dusk so that his limbs are slackened, if not with fatigue, with the healthy

languor of the open air, sleep woos him sweetly and turns sour at refusal. He had tried to make her see it, but she was not to be softened. Her cruelty drove him into black silences, from which she teased him with pretended tenderness, rousing his hopes for the pleasure of defeating them again. Yes, she was a cruel woman. God help him, for he had fallen in love with a cruel woman. As he fought with her in the dusty, sweet-smelling darkness, his brain and body grew dizzy with weariness.

It would not have been so bad if she had dealt honourably with him during the day, walking by his side like a comrade, putting off her womanhood, and helping him by her good fellowship to observe the prohibitions she had herself pronounced. But day was for Tamar one long preparation for the night ; she was not content unless she had wrought upon his senses until he was ready to kill her, taking base advantage of the fact that, with the stallion in hand, he could do nothing. So that when night came, and she joined him upon the straw, he was like a madman—which contented Tamar. She was the kind that is not content to leave a man one shred of nobility ; that knows not pleasure unless it has reduced him to a less than nothing, a grovelling travesty of a human being. To this end she pricked and goaded him throughout the day, and poisoned him no less with her sweetness than with her cruelty.

Jim had never known such a woman ; he was used to the matter-of-fact kindness of country women, to the vast illimitable depths of Ursula's tenderness.

At first the contrast had delighted him : he was like a milk-drinker suddenly offered vodka : she made him conscious of every nerve in his body, and charged his every cell with liquid fire ; in her embrace he became superman to himself, and did not at first question his effect upon her. Then, suddenly, in the twinkling of an eye, he was frightened. And he had not the faintest idea of when he became frightened. It was like that : he was not frightened—and then he was frightened. It only seemed to him, as he surrendered momentarily to the fear within him, dragging himself out of her arms, rolling away so that his body was not in contact with hers, that fear had been there all the time. In that blank moment he had a horror of her and her body, as though it were capable of communicating something fatal to him, and then he heard her rustling like a snake in the straw towards him and he gave himself up for lost—and then the illusion passed in her fresh assault upon him.

It was, of course, his restlessness and edginess that had unsettled the Pride and sharpened the edge of his temper ; although Jim, who had his share of rustic superstition, believed that the stallion had been bewitched as he himself had been, by Tamar, and in addition to his other troubles, was plagued with the fear that something would go wrong with his charge, and involve him in ruin and disgrace. His fears, however, were less strong than Tamar's power over him. The stallion, who was used to being treated with ceremony, took exception to Jim's handling, and either sulked or was vicious ; either

of these conditions being ominous signs to the man in charge of him.

Before his dealings with Tamar, the thought of evil in sex had never crossed Jim's mind : any more than it crossed the mind of the Pride. He had always come to it cleanly, like an animal, and had left it cleanly : a short, sharp experience, that filled a man with a sense of well-being, and left him proud of himself, more of a man than he had been before. There was not—had never been—an exoticism in his style of taking a woman ; he had no notion of any outlandish practices, and the strength and vigour of his own body had made it unnecessary for him to indulge in stimulant measures. He liked a bit of bawdy talk with a lass before tumbling her, but this out of sheer lightness of heart. His first fear of Tamar had risen out of her sinister approach to a business which was for him a matter of light and laughter : her tortuous way of dealing with a thing which nature intended to be gay, simple, and beneficent. And while his body responded to her tricks, his mind unwittingly separated itself, crawled a little apart, a scared thing.

This was the first way in which she injured him ; she brought the jealous influence of the mind to bear upon a thing which had been to him purely physical.

And the second way that she injured him was in destroying his innocence, the innocence of a good animal : for this mental side of himself, at which he was a little aghast, so little cognisance had he of the possession of a mind, became her especial

plaything : she used it to control his every twitch and tremor. Without knowing it, conscious only of a feeling of unease, he was a thing befouled, within twenty-four hours of meeting her. He only knew that she had injured his body, which was so languid he hardly knew it for his own. He had not the slightest idea that the injury she had done to his soul was far deeper and more permanent than any that she had inflicted upon the material part of him.

Yet the same unclean power which scared him held him to her. He had, after all, no means of knowing it was unclean. His moral sense was a matter of theory, which he kept for the government of his domestic affairs ; he was intrinsically amoral, a happy pagan, unburdened by spiritual conceptions or belief in any particular thing but the supreme might and right of the male to fulfil himself in propagation. It was wholesome human nature and nothing else that set the suspicion acreep in his mind—a suspicion he tried to smother, because his vanity forbade him to allow himself to be beaten in a familiar game—that Tamar's wiles were a species of devildom. But he set his teeth and refused to be frightened into withdrawal. He was a fool at darts, his clumsy hands never held a ball, he never played a game of dominoes without being beaten, but, by God ! he could handle a woman ! She'd learn that in the end.

And, through it all, he loved her ; and his love was a thing apart from his love for her body. His love for her was made up of the dread and awe born in the human soul for the inapprehensible, and a proud,

protective tenderness towards something that was dependent on him for material things. He fed the latter emotion by gifts to her : the red shoes were followed by a necklace of blue glass, and this by a little purple comb which she stuck in her hair. He thought of her often, drawing the other comb, with its gaps like hollow teeth where once there had been sparklets, out of her smouldering hair, and smiling upon it reminiscently.

"Ay, it was a fine lad gave me that, over to Chesham, one Michaelmas."

"Chuck it away," growled Jim, between his teeth.

"Ay, a fine, upstanding lad he was, six foot if he was an inch, with hair on his head like dandelions," she pursued. Her mocking eyes voiced a comparison between the two givers of the combs. Jim felt his heart turning to water ; her contempt stripped him of manhood a dozen times in a day.

"Chuck it away !" he blustered.

She smiled, and thrust the purple comb in its place.

"Nay, I'll not chuck it away ; maybe I'll just bury it under a primrose root, for remembrance !"

He watched her doing it, with murder in his heart ; but the next moment she rewarded him with a smile full of cajolery and a flaunting toss of her head.

He bought her packets of Robin cigarettes, and, himself no smoker, laughed to see her puffing them as she strode beside him. The only thanks he got was her pleasure in his gifts ; she was unable to conceal

it, it burned in her like a still flame. It was the thing that gave him courage to go on besieging the fortress which she held against him, the fortress of her secret self.

He had never, before Tamar, known a woman who possessed a secret self. This was the thing that goaded him into futile efforts to put himself in possession of the one thing she denied him : the thing which, by denial, had come to be the most important part of their relationship. Her denial held him outside her, reduced his hold upon her, and ridiculously belittled him in his own eyes. All day long she led him at her heels, as he led the Pride, humiliating him with constant reminders of his dependence on her complaisance. She was, in point of fact, the living counterpart of the Belle Dame Sans Merci. And she bemazed and confused to the point of madness the man who had never before in his life given a thought to a woman's soul. She kept him in constant wonder, why it was, even after she had been kind to him, that he still felt unsatisfied, in some deep, ungetatable part of him. What was it she withheld? What was it that took the sweet taste out of their loving?

He lay listening to her laughter as though it were sweet music. It was the slow striking of the hour from an Aldmaston steeple that brought him reluctantly to his feet.

"Where are you going?" she challenged.

"It's time I give the Pride his supper."

"The Pride ! The Pride !" she mocked. "And here am I telling you a fine tale, and you can talk of naught but the Pride ! All right, then, go and feed your damned Pride, and I'll find a lad that'll not find something better to do when I sit on a fence and tell tales to him."

"You've told me that one before," answered Jim, not surlily, but as one who states a simple fact. "It's a grand tale, and you tell it grandly ! I'd give a deal to have seen you and——"

"Be damned to your smooth words !" she cried, and smote him not hard, but sharply, across the mouth. "I'll find a better one to listen than you——" and, springing off the fence, she made towards the village. He trudged beside her, chewing the corner of his moustache, and muttering.

"If you'll bide there I'll be back in no time. Pride hasn't been out to-day ; it won't take me long to do with him."

"And it'll not take me long to find better company than your own," she retorted.

He had learned that it was useless to argue with her in these moods, so he tightened his lips and turned away from her. But, as he hurried towards the stables, his heart quickened its beat, knowing her power to make good her threat. He comforted himself with the thought that Aldmaston lads were slow in love-making as in speech, and that if he hastened, ten to one he would find her kicking her heels, waiting him, with a fine tale on her lips about the man who had made love to her in his absence ! He knew that these tales of hers were often lies, but the

possibility of truth in them made their every parting into an agony for him.

So he was in no mood to deal with the fractious Pride when he went into the stall ; but although he had not taken the stake with him—he had forgotten it, and only remembered, with a leap of the heart, when he found himself close to the Pride's towering silver flank—the white horse made no overt sign of enmity beyond the rolling of a sullen eye, and the sinister backward prick of a pointed ear.

It was different, however, when it came to shaking up the straw for the Pride's bed. Ordinarily, as soon as he took the pikel in hand, Jim soothed the Pride by talking in undertones to him, or even by whistling a tune between his teeth. To-day he was silent, and only spoke to bid the stallion "come over."

The Pride was deliberately mulish. Instead of heaving his huge limbs into the required places at Jim's command, he fidgeted and slithered on the stone flooring, spread himself over the whole stall, wrenched on the chain fastened to his halter so that it ran clattering through the iron staple of the manger, upset Jim's bucket with a plunging hoof, and roused Jim's smouldering ire to the point of yelling at him, "Stand still, you b—— !"

The moment his voice ceased echoing in the vaulted stable, Jim knew he had made a mistake. He had never used such a tone to the Pride before. The white horse turned his head slowly, and directed upon Jim—shut into an angle of the stall by the Pride's immense body—a slow look of astonishment,

into which the frenzied man read malice, scorn, and mockery of his own weakness. Losing his head completely, he shrieked another imprecation at the Pride, and, doubling his fist, drove it upwards at the horse's jaw.

Instantly the lips flew back from the vicious yellow teeth, the Pride whipped round, stretched his neck and seized Jim's left shoulder. He screamed as he fancied he heard the crunch of the bone : blood ran hotly down his upper arm as he dragged it away, and flung himself past the threatening heels of the stallion through the door of the stable.

He watched, through a dizzying mist, his own blood dripping on the cobbles. Then there were faces, and voices, and suddenly he dropped forward, face to the ground.

Tamar was kind to him that night. His shoulder was like a furnace ; the bone was not broken, but there was a big open wound, a muscle was torn, and a vast contusion surrounded the gash in the flesh. He had yelled when the doctor cleaned and iodised the wound, and sleep was out of the question. Equally out of the question was the doctor's advice to return immediately to Brambledown ; white-faced but swaggering, Jim swore that no one save himself could handle the Pride, and that, luckily, it was the left arm, and they had not much further to go. For nothing on earth would he renounce these last days with Tamar.

But many a time in the night, unable to sleep for

the fire in his shoulder, he whimpered, and she gentled him, showing herself more womanly than he had believed her capable of being. If there was scorn in her gentling, she concealed it well ; she was almost as kind as Ursula, and had more wisdom, for, when pain drove him to cursing and swearing in the night, she stole out into the moonlight and returned presently with a handful of leaves which she soaked in water, and, gently removing the scalded dressing that the doctor had laid on his arm, she replaced it with the cool leaves, which, from time to time, she renewed from the bucket at her side.

And, when dawn came, she helped him to adjust the sleeve which the doctor had slit, and re-fastened the sling which carried his burning arm. Ordinarily she vanished from his side with dawn, to avoid discovery when the men began to stir about the stables ; but on this morning she stayed boldly with him. He was too sick to trouble about the danger of their situation, and paid no more heed than she did to the nods and winks that their appearance set adrift. Luckily, there was no woman about the place, or there would doubtless have been unpleasantness ; but the owner of the stables, a strict Primitive Methodist, drew down a long lip, and pursed his mouth as he realised the true reason of Jim's refusal of a bed on the previous night.

She accompanied him to the doctor, who was less strait-laced and paid more attention than suited Jim to his companion : and later in the morning they set forth, leading the Pride, who was sullen and tetchy, but who had submitted to the bridle, which Jim,

STALLION

assisted by one of the stablemen, had got upon him.

She had to offer Jim her shoulder to lean upon before they reached their next place of call. She grimaced as she did so, but what less could she do? But her brain got busy ; it was tedious work, leading a maimed man about the country.

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STALLION

assisted by one of the stablemen, had got upon him.

She had to offer Jim her shoulder to lean upon before they reached their next place of call. She grimaced as she did so, but what less could she do? But her brain got busy ; it was tedious work, leading a maimed man about the country.

CHAPTER X

THERE came the day when they quarrelled—the day that the gods had surely marked with a black cross on Jim's calendar ; for it was no ordinary quarrel. It was more like a dark engagement of infernal powers, that took place in a lane not fifteen miles from Aumbury. It could have but one ending, and, mercifully, that ending was hidden from them both : although, if some augur had read the signs and warned them of their danger, the malign fates would surely have driven them on to their destruction.

It was a grey day, with a sky that held rain, but would not, in Jim's opinion, let it down for another four-and-twenty hours.

Over at Bramble, Annie clutched her heart and looked out of the window ten times in an hour ; after lunch she had leave to go home and get her May Queen's dress from her mother, and it looked as if that was about as much May Queen as she was likely to have. The weather, after a perfect fortnight, had broken ; anything might be expected. Mrs. Boswell, the Vicar's wife, said it was a pity they couldn't rush the procession on before the rain came ; but as the band, which had been ordered from Tod-market, was not arriving until the following morning, this was out of the question, and poor Annie

gloomed and trembled, and was as much use in the kitchen, as the cook rancidly told her, as a cow in a hencoop.

At Archover, Mildred sniffed over her cup of morning tea, and excused her depression by reference to the weather. "It's enough to make anyone put themselves in the well!" Jack's answer did nothing to raise her spirits: "I should think we'll both find ourselves in the well unless something happens by the end of the week"—something being the sale of a pair of boots to a farmer who could pay cash down, or a sudden run of cobbling that would pay the rent. It seemed as though boots in Archover never wore out; or else it was true about people taking their shoe-leather to Thatch End rather than submit it to Jack's clumsy cobbling, thought Mildred. She pressed her hand to her stomach and tried to drink some more tea. She supposed she was all right now, but the stuff the woman had given her had taken the inside out of her. She had thought more than once that she was done for. Now she was weak as a kitten, and Jack seemed to suspect something.

And at Aumbury, Ursula looked up at the sky anxiously and wondered if she would get her sheets dry before it "came on," and wished Jim were there to reassure or warn her about the weather: he always knew better than she did; and comforted herself by reflecting that he would soon be home, and the house was spotless, and she would coax him to spend some of the money on a new roof for old Betsy's sty, because the old one had fallen in

unexpectedly, and there was poor old Betsy, exposed to the elements—and her expected to farrow about the same time the cat had kittens. Ursula's step was light, and she had almost succeeded in forgetting the postcard ; she was thankful there had been no others.

And Jim and Tamar had reached Great Beare, which was about ten miles the other side of Bramble-down, and their faces were set towards the end of their journey.

Healthy as an animal's, his wound had already covered itself with a thin film of new skin, but this kept breaking, as he seldom remembered to keep the arm still. It still pained him, and Tamar had grown tired of dressing it with soaked leaves, although he swore that these did it more good than the doctor's dressings. He had to get help with stabling the Pride, and this was not always easy to come by, for many of the stable-lads were scared of the stallion and kept as far as possible out of his range. And it was exhausting only to have the one arm to lead with ; but here Tamar had unexpectedly taken her share of work. He had resigned the halter to her at first with apprehension, but, seeing the Pride's apparent gratification at his new leader, and Tamar's amusement at her new occupation, he left them to it. The Pride went gentle as a lamb ; he was a little tired ; he looked forward to his return to his own stable. His resentment seemed to have expended itself in that one attack, but Jim still went warily, and armed with the stake, which he carried in the crook of his left arm, into the stall. He was prepared

for the Pride to attack again, and he did not much care if he did. Next time he would go down, under those massive hooves, and allow the great horse to beat the life out of him. He had grown utterly dull and indifferent. The Pride met his indifference with an indifference of his own. He paid no more attention to Jim than to a fly on the ceiling of the stable. His inattention was his mark of contempt.

Jim had always disliked coming to Great Beare, because he knew that Ursula expected him to go and see Prue, who was in her first place there. He disliked Prue, and hated going to the house where she was in service ; but a feeling that, perhaps, after all, he owed something to Ursula, generally made him fall in with her wishes. The unfortunate part of it was that he had to go to Great Beare frequently, on Brambledown business, and so it had always come to be connected in his mind with the tiresome task of seeing Prue.

On the present occasion he would have given all he had to get out of seeing his youngest daughter, but prudence warned him that now, if ever, he must give Ursula no cause to suspect that anything out of the ordinary had happened to him. He took it for granted, as news always flies about the countryside, that she would have heard of his accident, and chewed over this as an excuse for not going to see Prue ; but, thinking better of it, he shrugged his shoulders up to his ears, and started off, having visited the doctor for his dressing, for the baker's shop where Prue worked as "general" for a household of man and wife and five children.

He explained to Tamar where he was going, and got a sardonic laugh for his pains. He had had, at last, to tell her about Ursula—which he did as tersely as possible. Dreams had retreated and realities come unpleasantly close to him during the past twenty-four hours. His brain felt like a bundle of red-hot steel wires ; what in mercy's name he was to do with Tamar he had no idea. There was no question of taking her either to Brambledown or Aumbury, and he could not afford to keep her in lodgings in any of the further villages. The thought of losing her drove him crazy, and her own attitude to their approaching separation maddened him further. Tamar was quite prepared—and showed it—to pass on like a ship in the night, a rôle which he suspected she had played before. She seemed determined not to afford him the gratification of a sigh, a tear, or any expression of her regret that their partnership was to come to an end. It was enough, he reflected, as he tramped along the High Street, to make a man into a murderer ; between his teeth he execrated her ingratitude, swallowing at the same time the lump that rose in his throat when he thought of losing her, of her attaching herself to some other as she had attached herself to him—as lightly, as falsely, as careless of consequences.

It did not improve his temper to meet an acquaintance who clapped him—fortunately—on the sound shoulder and exclaimed,

“Laws mercy, Jim, what's happened ye? Have ye bin in the wars?”

“Nowt,” snarled Jim, moving to pass on. But

kindness or curiosity held the other in his path.

"Nay, ye can't bamboozle me. Why, deng it, Jim, you look like a chap was sick to death!"

He flung himself aside with an oath, and left the man staring after him with open mouth.

He hammered on the side door of the baker's as though to wake the dead, and presently his daughter Prue stood before him, her eyes cast down after a quick look, her hands wiping themselves on her apron.

The sight of her made him swallow an imprecation : standing there, sneakish prim, like a school-marm. Annie would have given a whoop and flung her arms round his neck. If a man wasn't plagued with his daughters ! Only one decent one among the lot of them—Mildred a wedded fly-by-night, Fenny a creeping jinny, and this five-foot nothing of psalm-singing, squinting down her nose as if her father wasn't fit to be looked at ! God, if he'd had a son ! The thought drove a nail into him. Supposing Tamar were to have a son, and him not knowing where she or the boy were : *His* boy—growing up among strangers, varmint, hedgerunners ! He choked upon the thought, and he grunted a " Well ? " at Prue, who seemed disposed to await his greeting if she kept her own lips closed till sundown.

" Good morning, father," said Prue primly. She had a small, flat, self-righteous face, stiffly framed by lank hair of no particular colour. She was the only one of the Devoke girls who had no pretension to good looks. Her father's broad, squat figure was oddly topped by her little head. No one ever knew

what Prue thought of them ; she had never been known to bestow a caress even upon the pets of the household, and withheld her disapprovals behind thinly folded lips, although she made them clear enough by the downward droop of her eyelids.

She cast a quick look behind her.

“Are you coming in, father?”

He had no excuse for refusing to do so, and the two sat down together in a kitchen that prickled with neatness and with the cold sparkle of polished metal and china. The baker's wife, who was there, nodded a brisk “Good morning” to Jim, asked what he had done with his arm, and then, presumably out of tact, left them alone. She was a woman of superior education, whose every word and action Prue sedulously copied. Prue, who had gone to Sunday-school with her sisters, was now a staunch supporter of the Baptist chapel which her mistress attended, and disliked coming home on Sundays because it meant forsaking her place in the choir.

The two sat opposite each other, in the awkward silence of people who have nothing in common. Presently Jim, tiring first of this uncheering occupation, growled :

“I suppose you wouldn't be offering your father a glass of beer?”

“We're teetotal here,” said Prue, pursing her lips.

“God deng it,” he burst out, “that's what's the matter with you ! Can't you look a bit more lively, my girl ? You couldn't pull a longer face if you'd just come from a funeral.”

“I'm quite all right, thank you, father,” said Prue,

with maddening coolness. "I suppose you're all right?"

"A lot you'd care or notice if I was at my last gasp! You've got eyes in your head, haven't you?" He jerked the arm in the sling, not wishing for her commiseration, which would have irked him as much as her blindness, but infuriated because she seemed deliberately to ignore his condition.

"I don't know what you've done to yourself, but I suppose you've been having too much beer," said Prue smugly.

"Oh, ay, beer mangles a man's arm, doesn't it? Deng your impudence, what's it got to do with you how much beer I have?" Fuel was added to his wrath because she happened to be right. He had tried that way of drowning his misery in the last twenty-four hours, and, among his other weaknesses, he could not drink to excess with impunity.

"I smelt it," sniffed Prue, wrinkling her nose. "I expect Mrs. Samson did too. That'll be why she went out."

He consigned Mrs. Samson to hell with an unprintable expression.

"If I couldn't find a better use for my nose I'd say less about it," he ended, getting up. "Well, I'll be going. I only came in because *she'll* want to know how you're getting on. Deng me if I know why she bothers her head about you! If ever there was a one for looking after herself, and deng the rest, it's you, my girl!"

"I've not given you much trouble, anyhow," answered Prue, with truth. "Not as much as you'll

have with Mildred and Annie before you've done with them ! ”

“ Always picking on your sisters, aren't you ? Well, for all your chapel-going and mealy-mary you're just about fit to clean their boots. Good day ! ” snarled Jim, including Mildred in his defence of Annie, as he snatched up his cap and strode out of the house.

He was like a keg of gunpowder on the point of ignition when he returned to Tamar. And, to lay the match to the fuse, what should he find her doing but leaning on a rail, watching some ducklings scuffling among the green scum of their pond, and laughing fit to kill herself at their precocious antics !

“ You're bloody clever to find something to laugh at, aren't you ? ”

For a wonder, she stopped laughing, and answered him gently.

“ Why can't we part gaily, as we've lived gaily together ? ” she asked him suddenly.

“ If you'd got blood in your body, instead of adder's milk, you'd not ask it, ” he retorted.

She drew him to the grass at the side of the lane.

“ I shall miss you, ” she said lightly.

“ It's a wonder the lie doesn't choke you ! ”

“ What's lies to some is truth to others. ”

“ What do you want to take possession of a man for, if you mean to throw him aside in the end ? ” he cried bitterly. She chewed a clover stalk reflectively.

“ Let's see, ” she began, with mock solemnity. “ What day was it you told me we'd go before a parson, and you'd put a fine gold ring on my finger,

and the church bells would ring for the wedding of a stableman and a vagrant lass ? ”

“ You know right well I’d put ten rings on your fingers if I was able ; but that wouldn’t keep you true to me.”

“ Maybe you’re right ; there isn’t much to keep a woman in a hard, cold ring, even if it’s a gold one,” conceded Tamar.

“ And a lot you care for a church wedding ! ” he jeered at her.

She laughed and stretched her arms.

“ You’re right again ; a lot I care ! Why, I’d not wed you if you went down on your bended knees to me ! ”

“ That’s a fine bold lie ! You’d go ranting off to church with me fast enough, if I was to show you a grand house of your own t’other side of it ! ”

“ You’re one for telling the tale ! ” she mocked.

“ What’s to become of it, if you have a child of mine ? ”

“ I’ll tell you. It’ll be born under a hedge, and the wind’ll blow on it and the rain’ll rain on it and it’ll whimper with cold on frosty nights—poor worm ! And I’ll carry it in my arms for a bit, maybe till I’m tired, or there’s a poorhouse handy ! Or, if I like it—if it’s a fine fighting boy with eyes set in like mine—the pair of us maybe will find our way back to the fair ; and he’ll grow up under a caravan ; and the women will clout him and the men will teach him to drink beer and steal a hen here and there. Ah, be done with your ‘ ifs,’ ” she cried, as she saw a change come over his face. “ Do you take me for a fool ? ”

"By God," he whispered, "if you betray me over that I'll come after you and choke the breath out of your body, wherever you are!"

"'Tis odd how a dead woman'll draw a man when a live one won't," she philosophised.

He stared at her, slow understanding dawning in his brain. So that was what she wanted him to do! The thought of leaving Ursula had never, to that moment, entered his brain. He had gone back to Ursula so often, so inevitably, that the possibility of doing otherwise had never presented itself to him. He had a brief pricking of triumph, until the expression on her face warned him that the suggestion might arise as much from her desire to spite Ursula—a woman whom she had never seen—as from her desire for his company.

To test her, he said cunningly :

"I'd be a lot of good to you, wouldn't I?—with my job gone and not a crust to put in our mouths!"

"Maybe they'd put you in charge of the hobby-horses!" she answered him, with her incorrigible flippancy. "How'd you like that for a change? They're less trouble, are hobby-horses, than real ones!"

"Maybe you think I don't know enough about handling the real ones!" he answered her dangerously.

Her inscrutable gaze was fastened upon him. Presently she nodded her head.

"Ay, that's about it. Can't master a woman and can't master a horse. Who's to reckon much to a chap of that sort?"

It was then that the storm broke between them : the storm which was to have so fatal an ending for both. Like a couple of hedgerow drabs they sat cursing each other. The clouds were hung like folds of grey canvas overhead, and over Brambledown came the distant mutter of thunder. The lightning flashed once like a sword unsheathed in the sky, and neither noticed it. His wound had broken again with his violent movements, and he was crazy with mental and physical anguish. She flung her taunts like ice-shafts against him, and he dragged every gutter epithet into his stuttering replies.

The chance arrival of some of his acquaintances brought their war to an end for the time ; he was too near home to continue a brawl with a woman in front of witnesses, and she had had enough of it. She dragged her packet of Robins out of the pocket of her jersey and lit one defiantly. The yokels stared and nudged one another as they went past, with, " Marning, Jim ! " In the unsophisticated neighbourhood of Great Beare it was still unheard-of for a woman of their own class to be seen smoking out of doors. The opinion went round that Jim had picked up a regular rag-tag and bobtail this time. " Her looks as if her'll make him sorry afore her's done wi' him ! " " Maybe he's sorry a'ready ! " Maybe—maybe : the noncommittal chant of rustic wisdom went chiming on.

Then the rain came on : in drops the size of pennies, that drove them reluctantly towards the factory buildings which sprawl at the entrance to Great Beare : a dry-saltery. They took shelter in a

shed that opened upon a yard of which the gates were open. The heat within the high brick walls was stifling ; in spite of the rain, there seemed not to be a breath of air.

Jim felt a choking sensation ; he wrenched at the neckband of his shirt and broke the buttonhole ; his mouth and tongue were dry and sour like leather, and there was a dark thing which struggled within him for possession. It was the dark thing that suddenly hurled him upon her with such violence that the two of them lost their balance, and would have fallen but for the wall behind her. He had her by the throat, pinned against the wall : and, even so, she offended him by being taller than himself. He stood panting, with his weight upon the hand that pinned her thin throat, wondering how this had happened, what had made him do it, and what was to become of them both.

She looked at him calmly, although the pressure upon her throat was making the blood pulse in her temples ; the cigarette had fallen from her lips, and smouldered on the floor between them.

“ You’ve got to kill me, have you, before you feel that you’re a man ? ” she whispered.

Her uncanny interpretation of his thoughts made him reel away from her in horror. She moved nonchalantly, as though their conversation had been trivial, and the next moment he saw the reason for her nonchalance, as a lorry drove into the yard and stopped in front of the shed in which they were standing. The driver descended from his seat and entered, nodding knowingly at Jim.

"What ho, Jim. Nice day for ducks. Anybody about?"

The rain beat down upon the containers with which the lorry was loaded with a rattle of musketry. The driver cocked a knowledgeable eye at the sky.

"It's naught but a local splash. I'll lay it's fine over to Aumbury. Going home to-night, Jim?"

Jim muttered something. Tamar had sauntered to the farther end of the shed, and stood in darkness, seeing but unseen. An inner door of the shed opened and a man came through, greeting the driver with a wag of the head. The two men started lifting the containers into the shed; they were counted; a book was signed.

"Well, so long, Harry." The driver raised his eyebrows, jerked a thumb in the direction of Jim, whose back was turned, and climbed into his seat again. "See you later?"

"Maybe. So long, George."

The lorry drove out of the yard; the rain continued to pour down in dense serration of steel rods, striking the hard earth and shooting off it in bursts of spray that made the surface of the yard look as if it was misted. The man addressed as Harry stood scratching his head and looking at Jim's back.

"Somebody's getting a wetting somewhere," he offered. "Been coming to grief, Jim?" he added, as Jim, not knowing what to say or do, turned and came towards him. Tamar had vanished behind the door through which the man had entered.

"Ay," he grunted, and looked about for a subject.

The containers, arranged along the sides of the shed, offered as good a one as any. "Got plenty of beer in, I see, Harry!" he said, with a sorry attempt at jocularity.

"Ay," said Harry, conceding a grin to Jim's humour. "You wouldn't be wanting any more beer if you was to take a sup out of one o' them!"

"Ay?" said Jim, cursing him because he showed no signs of departure. The lust of the human being to demonstrate a superior knowledge lighted the eye of Harry as he gave the stuff its chemical name, which he translated into the popular form for Jim's benefit. Jim started slightly, looking at the containers with a feeling that their contents were evil; their shapes peopled the dark shed with a sinister army. Harry, perceiving that he had made an impression, became more informative.

"Ay, the saying is that a country's prosperity can be measured from its output o' yon stuff," he said proudly; from his manner one might have gained the impression that he was personally concerned in the production of the substance under discussion. "They call it the key chemical," he concluded, challenging Jim with a frown to call him a liar. Any desire he might have had to do so was swallowed in Jim's bucolic awe at finding himself in such close association with a thing with whose name the *News of the World* had made him acquainted, and which is surrounded for most people by an atmosphere of horror and tragedy.

"What's it look like?" he asked.

"'Ave a look," offered Harry, rising on tiptoe to

reach something from a cobwebby shelf. "It ain't supposed to be kept out here, loose as you might say ; but I generally keep a drop handy—it comes in for one thing or another. There you are, you see—take it for water, wouldn't you ? Till you handled it ; heavy, see ? " Jim reluctantly took the stoppered bottle into his hands. In that moment he had unwittingly an experience that is given to few men—of holding his own fate in his hands. He put the bottle hastily down as a voice shouted from within.

"I'm wanted," said Harry hastily. "Shove that bottle back on the shelf, Jim—you'll be stopping till the rain's left off ? There's some sacks in the corner, if you want a lie down."

The inner door clanged behind him ; Jim heard a key turn. Tamar came from behind the door, where she had been leaning.

"What were you hiding for ? " he asked her sullenly.

"Did you want to show me to your friends ? " she inquired ironically. Her finger pointed into the shadows from which she had emerged. "I've found a sort of cupboard there—at least, it's a wee little room with a window. I'm tired. It's little enough sleep I've had lately. I'm going to lie down till the rain's over. Where's the sacks he was talking about ? " He nodded towards them. "And what's the stuff he was showing you ? "

It seemed to him, in view of their past quarrel, that it would be impossible, even indecent, to tell her. His rage had simmered down, but his fancy played with the thought that other people in his place had

made use of the diabolical contents of the glass bottle ; like every normal human being, the thought filled him with horror. He said, vaguely, that it was some stuff they used in the trade, and followed her to see the cupboard she had found.

It was a small wooden extension of the shed, apparently used for storage, and dimly lighted by a cob-webbed window high in the wall. There was a narrow floor space, on which she spread the sacks, then laid herself down with the facility of a creature so little acquainted with the softness of beds that it finds no hardship in laying itself to rest upon hard earth. She lay there supine, with her head pillowed on her clasped hands, and, after one glance at Jim, she closed her eyes.

The rain kept up its hollow thunder on the corrugated roof of the shed ; it drowned all other noises ; it drummed in Jim's brain as he rested his right shoulder against the door-jamb, looking down on Tamar. Its drumming was a barrage round them both. A thin, dusty light allowed him to see her, lying so still, with her limbs straightened, and her thin bosom, that peaked into two faint hills the limp lines of her clothing, rising and falling evenly with her breath. But for that slight movement one could have taken her for dead ; for the strange light had charred the colour out of her face and hair and hollowed her eye-sockets and beneath the cheekbone with shadow.

A sharp foretaste of his coming bereavement flung Jim on his knees beside her. The loose-hung door, which the weight of his body had been holding back,

thudded behind him, enclosing them both in this space hardly broader than a grave.

Her eyes opened to take in his appeal ; and, for once, she did not refuse him. Pressing his left arm close to his chest, so as to save it as much as possible, he gripped her with his right, and sought blindly with his lips for hers. The foreboding came over him that this might be the last time he would have her—although they were supposed to stay overnight at Great Beare, and their parting was not to be until the morrow.

He wanted to love her with everything—with the large part of his body and the small part of his mind. He wanted to put everything, his body and his mind and his soul, into the act of loving her, so that in one great conquering climax he would redeem himself. And in the very heart of his struggle lurked the knowledge that he was not succeeding. It maddened him, so that he was cruel with her ; it became a struggle of souls, a fight to the death, rather than an act of love. It was bitterness and rapture, hell-hard suffering and crazy delight. There was murder in it, and an unspeakable degradation of violence. And through it went the red-hot pain of his wounded shoulder, like a saw. He became quite mad ; he began to fancy that he was the Pride, that the power of the great white horse had passed into him ; he saw himself rampant in silver ; he was a god, a generic force. . . .

Lying still, with his face pressed into the dusty sack, he thought, " I've won. At last I've won." The peace that spread through him was unlike anything that he had ever known. It was the peace of

disembodiment, of translation into air. Outside that peace was a dull throbbing which he did not associate with his own body. He was not drowsy, but all loveliness, all bliss, had entered into him, and he only wanted to be very still, to know that he was no longer a broken thing, but a thing made whole.

Gradually consciousness of the flesh returned. His own hand, lying near his face, began to have a character of its own. At first the forest of black hairs on the finger-joints and above the wrist fascinated him, seen at such close quarters : so quiet now—a sleeping fury. Pride shot up in him ; this was his own hand.

He turned over, but, cautiously as he performed the movement, pain from his shoulder stabbed him in the bowels ; his right hand clutched it, found a patch of damp, and knew that the wound had broken out again.

Tamar lay, turned a little away from him, with her face towards the wall. He raised himself, peeped over the thin ridge of her shoulder.

She was lying with her head resting on her crooked arm. She was as still as himself, and took no notice of him. Leaning across her, he stared, at first with incredulity, at her white, cold face. The corner of her lips was drawn into a little satirical smile. And as he looked at this cold, indifferent face, his heart withered. He knew that, instead of conquering her, she had annihilated him ; that his embrace had meant nothing to her, that she was as invincibly her own as she had ever been. And he cursed the darkness which had, up to this time, withheld from him

that betraying nothingness, that steady, cold indifference that reduced him to a pigmy, an ant, a grain of dust. He sat there, trying to realise that she had stripped him of everything, trying to understand. . . .

He watched her rise, shaking the dust from her jaded skirts, push open the door, and walk towards the steely shimmer of the yard, against which her narrow, flat figure was silhouetted as though cut out of black paper. The rain had stopped : the sky was white, and its whiteness ran down into wet roof and pavement surfaces.

She stood in the doorway, with her hands braced on the two doorposts ; her shadow fell cruciform into the patch of sullen light on the dusty floor. So she remained : until that animal sense of hers warned her of danger from behind. As she whipped round she did something with her hands ; the right one held the knife in defence when she discovered herself faced by a madman.

One of them screamed.

CHAPTER XI

ANNIE had sent Mildred a postcard, asking her to come over to Aumbury and see her in her May Queen's dress, since she would not be able to get to Bramble for the procession. Mildred sniffed over it, fingered it, and ended by going to look at the glass. She was fond of Annie, quite fond enough to make the effort on her account. They had the habit of showing each other their new clothes, of asking each other's advice (although seldom accepting it), and Annie would feel disappointed if the chorus of admiration lacked Mildred's voice. But what a mess she looked ! Almost a ragged trollop—almost as bad as the woman who had sold her the medicine secretly, behind a caravan at Archover fair. She had shuddered as the hoarse voice directed her, in a whisper, how to take it ; she would never have gone, in spite of her desperation, if she had not been urged by another woman in Archover to do so. It appeared that that skinny clothes-prop of a creature was famous among the married women of Archover ; her reputation circulated in whispers, which were hushed the second that any man approached. Sure as the Bank of England was the stuff she gave one ; and those who had tested its security forbore to pass on the tale of their subsequent sufferings.

God, it had made a mess of her ! There were her

eyes, black half way down her cheeks, and her jaw and cheek-bones looking as if they were ready to cut their way through the flesh, and her hair just a flat tangle pushed behind her ears—its lustre gone, and enough to make a wig twisted into the teeth of the comb every time she did her hair. It was pretty much of a give-away, wasn't it? And Jack had guessed. He hadn't said much, but he was pretty nasty, the way he let her see he knew what she'd been up to. Almost as if he despised her ; and yet she'd done it mostly on his account.

Oh, she was sick, sick and fed up with being married, with the sordid little dusty house and shop, and Jack's stupidity over the work, and his drinking. The tears came into her eyes as she thought of the days before she married : the nights when she and Annie shared a bed in a tiny room that was all bed, and lay awake whispering and giggling, with the scent of old wood and gardens and thatch pouring in through the foot-square window : with Ursula rapping on the floor of the room above to bid them be quiet, and Jim's shout when they took no notice of their mother. She was carried away with homesickness, so that, if she had not been so weak, so incapable of the violence of grief, she would have sat down and given way to weeping. Instead, she peered into the little looking-glass, and wondered, if she put on a good dose of powder and lipstick, if she would get past Ursula's eye. She could say she had had a cold—colds always "dragged her down"—and if she kept her coat on no one would notice how scarecrow thin she was.

As the bus carried her towards Aumbury, she began to wonder if she could make an excuse to spend a few nights with her family. She and Jack were sick of the sight of each other, and he had begun to talk about going up to London again, if the money could be found. Well, let him sell something—the dresser or the sofa, or even the bed they lay upon : she did not care. Let him take himself away and be done with her for ever. She sniffed a little and rubbed her nose with a handkerchief. It wasn't much of a way of ending up, when one had been so proud—stuck-up, her sisters had called her—about getting married and having a place of one's own. That was the worst part of it.

The cottage was full of the scent of new-made bread ; Ursula had spent the morning baking, and the plump golden loaves lay in a row upon the dresser, like symbols of prosperity. Ursula's heart warmed as she looked upon them ; she had always been proud of her bread, and loved the act of making it. Bread-making and home-making went together ; good bread meant a good home, in Ursula's opinion ; the scent of the bubbling yeast was the sweetest of all perfumes in her nostrils. Once, catching her in the act of sniffing the bowl, Annie had said, " Why, mother ! The way you carry on you might be smelling a bottle of scent ! "

" I'd a deal rather smell of fresh bread than all the fancy perfumes folks put on their handkerchieves," retorted Ursula.

" That's a good idea ! " cried Annie, exploding into her ready laughter. " I can just see you, mother,

buying your scent at the baker's instead of the chemist's!" but she gave Ursula one of her boisterous hugs; somehow she liked the notion of her mother smelling of bread; bread was good, like Ursula.

She looked proudly at her loaves, and round her kitchen. From floor to ceiling there was not a speck or spot of dust, not a pin out of place, not a bit of brass or earthenware that did not give out the authentic gleam of perfect cleanliness. She had swept and garnished her house for Jim's return, and her soul sang like a caged bird. She was so careful, too, to keep her happiness to herself; it was something that belonged to her and him only, it was not to be cheapened by sharing it with anyone, not even her children. During the time he had been away, she had even unpicked and remade their feather bed, a yearly labour which she always kept for his absences; and while the tick was drying, and the feathers, sorted and replenished, absorbed the light and air by day, and were heaped into a cloth by night, she lay on the hard straw pallet that the girls had used, wakeful, allowing her thoughts to follow him. A kind of quiet glow shone out of her, but each time a step passed on the road her heart gave a tick and seemed to turn over; for there was just the chance that Jim would come home a day before the time. The moment was always followed by a little sick space, in which, once, the horrid thought occurred to her: Supposing he didn't come back at all? But the answer to this was so obvious that she threw back her head with the gesture that Annie had

imitated, and laughed quietly aloud, to Fenny's surprise.

As the Bramble bus got in before the bus from Archover, it was Annie who first came up the path, her usually cheerful face overcast like the sky, throwing an anxious glance upwards before unlatching the half-door. After kissing her mother she threw an appreciative look round the tidy little room. Ursula saw the glance, and was gratified ; Annie was the most truly domestic of the girls, though Prue and Fenny were neat enough. But Prue's was a hard neatness, and Fenny's was faddy ; neither had Annie's gift of loving order, not for its own sake, but because it meant comfort. Annie, settling into a tidy room, was like a hen settling on its nest. She saw everything that Jim would not see, although every dish and board had been scrubbed on his account. That was a man's way, thought Ursula, proudly ; the grand, masterful way of man.

"My goodness, ma, you've got the place like Buckingham Palace ! And, lord save us, the fireplace's gone Scotch !" shrieked Annie admiringly, as she noticed the strip of old tartan that Ursula had gathered into a frill, and nailed, with innocent vandalism, along the beam that crossed the chimney breast. "I love a lassie !" sang Annie, with what she took to be a Scotch accent, and seized her mother again round the neck, to bestow another smacking kiss on Ursula's smooth head. "But it's a laddie you love, isn't it, you old deceiver ! You ought to be ashamed of yourself, with four fine girls to keep your mind off the lads !—Hallo, Fen.—Is my

dress ready ? My God, ma, is it going to be fine to-morrow ? ”

“ I won’t have you swearing, Annie,” said Ursula placidly.

“ Well, swearing won’t make it wet or fine, or else maybe I’d sit right down here and start off with all the words I’ve heard dad use. I wondered if I’d find him here when I got home.”

“ He’s not due till to-morrow,” said Ursula, as much surprised as though the thought had never crossed her own mind.

“ No, but one of the lads from Bramble met him making over to Great Beare last night : I just wondered,” said Annie, discreetly repressing the further information she had about the meeting. He was an old rover, was dad ! When he went for her about Chris Raynor she would just have liked to have started in on him about some of his goings on ! However, whatever games he got up to when he was away, he always came home to mother.

“ I hope he’ll remember to go and see Prue.”

“ Poor old dad ! ” grimaced Annie, and stopped at her mother’s “ Now then ! ” “ Here, ma ! ” she said, dodging aside to pick up a cardboard box which she had dropped beside the door. “ What do you think Mrs. Boswell’s let me do ? She’s let me fetch over the robe and crown, so’s you could all see me properly dressed up, in case you didn’t get over to-morrow.”

“ That’s kindly,” assented Ursula, with her warm smile.

“ Ay, maybe I’d take it kindlier if I didn’t know

that what she meant was, supposing it rains and I never wear them at all ! ” lamented Annie. “ Here, Fenny—where’s the scissors ? I’ve tied this string up like a Chinese puzzle.”

“ Now just you unknot that string properly,” admonished Ursula. Annie winked at Fenny, who came forward to the rescue ; she liked undoing knots as much as Annie detested it. “ Come and see the apple-room ; we did it out yesterday.”

The apple-room, a tiny room opening off the kitchen, had been the elder girls’ bedroom ; since Mildred and Annie left home, it had been used to store apples, the paraphernalia of bee-keeping, and old coats and boots. Ursula threw the door open, and the glimmer of fresh whitewash struck clear into the dimness of the kitchen itself : for the window of the apple-room faced the afternoon sun. “ I’ve cleared all the old truck out into the shed ; doesn’t it look bonny ? ”

“ Wouldn’t it make us a fine parlour ? ” cried Annie, voicing Ursula’s inner thought. “ My word, wouldn’t we be grand with a parlour ? It would do for Fenny to sit spooning with her boys in ! ”

Ursula nudged her irrepressible daughter.

“ That’s what I’m going to tell your father. Maybe there’ll be a pound or two to spare when he comes home. I’ve always wanted a parlour,” confessed Ursula, with a comfortable sigh.

“ I’ve got three or four pounds in the savings bank,” said Annie instantly. She was the only one of the girls who was generous in the matter of sending a good part of her weekly wages home. Mildred,

of course, had nothing to send, and Fenny's earnings were more in kind than in cash : wages were not high in Aumbury. Prue grudgingly sent a shilling postal order each Saturday, invariably causing Jim to swear on Monday morning, that he would put it in the fire. But Ursula made no comment ; no more than Jim would she accept grudgingly given money from her children, but she had opened a savings bank account, without Prue's knowledge, in Prue's name, and was waiting until there should be five pounds in it, before telling her.

"Here's Mildred," said Annie suddenly.

"Mildred ?" For a moment Ursula seemed taken aback.

"I sent her a postcard to tell her to come over and see me all dressed up ; it's too far to get to Bramble from Archover," Annie was explaining, when Mildred's shadow fell across the threshold.

"Hello, mother—hello, Annie—hello, Fen." She tried breathlessly to sound hearty. Ursula quietly offered her cheek for a kiss, then withdrew into the shadows, where she could look at Mildred without being observed. Something—a shutter—had fallen between her and her second daughter. She knew that never again could Mildred mean anything to her ; she was just like any stranger, someone to be polite to, and kind if necessity arose : but she did not *matter*. In future, when people spoke to her of Mildred, she would listen with as little emotion as if they were telling her of friends of their own whom she had never seen. She was sorry about Mildred's looks—as she would have been sorry for any girl who was so

obviously ill : but she could not be sorry for Mildred herself, who, by an act of darkness, had brought sickness upon herself. Her home was always open to her ; if Mildred were sick she would nurse her, would sit up nights with her, would wash and feed and wait upon her ; but she would do all these things as though Mildred were a stranger, not as though she were her own child that her womb and her arms had cradled.

She had not been over to Archover, for the morning after Annie's visit she had had a letter from Mildred saying that she could not manage to get over and help with the cleaning because the shop was doing better, Jim was busy, and she had a lot to do : moreover, she wasn't feeling so well, though no doubt that would soon blow over. At the end, seemingly afraid that she had said too much, that the mention of her illness might bring Ursula over to see her, she had hastily scribbled, " Shall be out all day to-morrow and the day after, as Jim's heard of a cottage over at Sloope, where there's more chance of work, and we're going to look at it and spend the night with Jim's uncle who's in the mill at Clover." Apparently she did not stop to realise that she had, in this sentence, contradicted her previous statement about business being better : but, evidently feeling that further effort was needed to make her statement convincing, she had added, " I fancy the outing will do me good."

With tightening lips Ursula had folded the letter, pressing down the creases in the paper with her thumb-nail. It was evident that Mildred did not

want to see her. She did not believe the yarn about Sloope, and had it in her mind to go over and see Jack, if Mildred chose to take herself out of the way. Then she remembered what Annie had said about Jack's not knowing, and set the plan aside. Of one thing she was convinced : that Mildred was not in a serious condition, for, had that been so, she knew that the first person she had wanted had been her mother. All the girls were like that : even the stony Prue, taken with mumps a week after going to her place, had cried for her mother.

"Have you given me away to mother?" whispered Mildred, when she and Annie were closeted in Fenny's bedroom, for the robing.

"Me? No!" blurted Annie, taken by surprise. "What do you mean?"

"Well, she's queer to me. I believe you've been and said something!" challenged Mildred, seizing her sister's plump, uncovered shoulder. Annie, who was a bad liar, went crimson.

"Why should I?" she retorted defiantly. "One's only got to look at you to see there's something wrong with you!"

Mildred cast a despairing glance into the mirror, involuntarily comparing her haggardness with Annie's wholesome beauty. Suddenly she caught her lower lip in her teeth, and tears of self-pity rushed to her eyes.

"If I could get hold of that devil that sold me the physic, I'd tell the police about her!" she said viciously.

"H'n! And land yourself in gaol at the same time,

I suppose," snorted Annie, wrestling with hooks and eyes. "Here—you might give us a hand, instead of being sorry for yourself. You're out of the mess now, aren't you?"

"Yes, I am, and if I get into it again—so help me God, I'll put myself in the river before I'll take that stuff again! Oh, Annie!" wailed Mildred, fumbling with the hooks. "If you only knew! It was just like having a ball of red-hot thistles scraped round inside you!"

"Oh, shut up. You put a girl off," said Annie, taking refuge, as usual, in jocosity. But Mildred was in no mood for the jocose. She came round from behind Annie, and if ever a face held a warning in its blackened eye-sockets and down-dragging lines, it was hers. Annie's flesh crept, looking at it; for a minute she could not remember that this was her sister.

"If ever I hear of you trying my game, Annie, I'll tell the police about *you*. You can remember that; I mean it."

"Nice, sisterly thing to do, wouldn't it be?" jeered Annie uncertainly.

"I don't care. I'd do it. And when I see that trollop again I'll just bring my ten nails down her face to teach her to go poisoning folks when they go to her with their troubles!"

"Yes," said Annie absently. Her eyes were fixed on her own reflection, as though she hesitated to believe that it could speak the truth. "Look here Mildred: look—what about that, now?" As though afraid of rousing her sister's mockery by her

admiration of her own person, she hastily struck an attitude. " ' If you're waking, call me early, call me early, mother dear ! ' "

A kind of sublimation of jealousy took possession of Mildred, as she gazed at her sister : a jealousy less of the stiff white frock, which Ursula had starched and laundered until the frills stood out like paper, than of something altogether virginal and lovely that had gone from her for ever.

She wrenched her lips into a stiff smile.

" All right," she said.

" Go on ! " said Annie, scornful of such mean praise. " You're jealous. Come on, the robe and crown's downstairs—I knew I'd never get down the staircase in them."

" You go on, I'll just tidy myself a bit," murmured Mildred, dragging a weary puff out of the pocket of her coat.

The tiny kitchen seemed to be full of people, for Miss Blandford and Lovekin had joined the crowd of Annie's admirers. Fenny had told Miss Blandford in the morning about Annie's May Queening, and Miss Blandford had instantly inquired if she might come and see the Queen in her robes. At the last moment Lovekin had announced her intention of accompanying her—Lovekin, somewhat uneasily conscious of strained relations between her and her employer, had seen in the occasion an opportunity of reingratiating herself. The idea of dismissal had never entered her head, but there was certainly an uncomfortable atmosphere at Green Gates, for which she supposed she was responsible. Miss

Blandford accepted her escort without further comment than a lifted eyebrow, assuming that one of Lovekin's ploys with the Slades had, for some reason, fallen through, and stamped off, speechlessly, to the Devokes'.

Annie was not at all self-conscious in the presence of an audience. Her head bore bravely its load of gilt papier mâché and rabbit-fur, as her shoulders their load of purple plush. Lovekin, entering girlishly into the spirit of things, and fancying her own skill at private theatricals, instructed her as to the wielding of the sceptre.

"I never handled such a plaguey awkward thing!" Annie splutteringly confessed. "I want to carry it either like a rolling-pin or an umbrella!"

"An umbrella's more likely," put in Mildred, from the foot of the stairs. "Did you hear the thunder just then?"

"No," said Annie, thrusting out a plump underlip. "And I don't believe you did either! You just said it to plague me!"

"It's been growling all day over in the Great Beare direction," said Fenny.

"That's a good sign then," said Ursula calmly. "It means the storm's going to get itself over to-night; you'll have a blue sky to-morrow."

Miss Blandford, who was sitting in the armchair, with her walking-stick between her knees, and her hands clasped on its crooked handle, turned her head to look at Ursula: for it seemed to her that she was the real Queen of the May. Her little plump figure, her meek, greying hair, her work-worn

hands, primly clasped at her waist-band, all seemed as though they were irradiated from within—from some hidden place in her that held the secret of all content, all serenity, and all joy. The pride that swelled Annie's plump bosom (in the corsage arranged to accommodate it) was a frail beam compared to Ursula's pride ; Annie's breathless anticipation of the morrow a rushlight by comparison with the steady glow of confidence with which Ursula looked forward to the consummation of delight. She had got it all mixed up in her mind with Jim's return : Annie's triumph and the return of her husband were one and the same bliss to her, the one stealing radiance from the other to complement itself. The expression on her face was almost ecstatic ; cynical people might have considered it an exaggerated expression to wear on so simple an occasion. Becoming aware of Miss Blandford's look, she coloured a little and said, as though in apology :

“ It's a pity her father can't see her ; he's always so proud of our Annie.” She could not help giving herself away to that extent.

Fenny frowned, from her respectful position behind Miss Blandford's chair. She was not envious of Annie from one point of view, for nothing in the world would have induced her to make a show of herself parading through the village behind a brass band ; but she resented the fact that Miss Blandford's attention was not fully given to her. She had begun to be certain that Miss Blandford liked her, liked having her about, and she suffered some of the pique of the displaced favourite, as she

fancied all Miss Blandford's attention was given to Annie, who was showing herself off in such a forward manner that Fenny looked frowningly at her mother, hoping that Ursula would say a word to remind Annie that she was not alone with her family.

She did not know, for instance, that while Miss Blandford sat there, smiling benevolently upon the antics of Annie, she had come to a decision in her own mind. Yes, she would have a talk with Ursula : see how she took to the idea of allowing Fenny to come to Green Gates permanently, to be trained as a companion. She was hardened in her decision by the behaviour of Lovekin, who had broken hysterically into the country tune of "Strawberry Fair," and was teaching Annie to point her toe, to curtsy simperingly, in all of which Annie was an only too apt pupil. No ; Lovekin and Aumbury were definitely incompatible ; it was Lovekin *or* Aumbury, and Miss Blandford had made her choice. She was fully as conscious of Fenny standing behind her shoulder as Fenny was of her, but it was not the time to show it. She was for the moment focused upon the strange, calm beauty of Ursula—if one could use the word beauty in connection with such a little dumpy creature. The aristocracy of the soil.

A gust of gaiety had suddenly sprung up : Mildred, who was usually a little sheepish when gentlefolk were present, but who had evidently taken heart from Lovekin's "we're all girls together" manner, suddenly leaned back in her chair and began to sing "Land of Hope and Glory," which presumably

was suggested to her by Annie's purple robes. Lovekin took it up with gusto, climbing a chair to beat time, and Annie, at last convinced that the sun was going to shine and that she was to have her triumph on the morrow after all, made Fenny cringe by starting to march round and round in a space about five feet square, trailing her robe and stumbling over it, and bowing to imaginary subjects. Miss Blandford, mildly affected by the prevalent excitement, found herself tapping her stick on the floor in time to the tune. She and Ursula exchanged a look, on both sides of apology ; Ursula's begged Miss Blandford to overlook the fact that her girls had got "above themselves," and Miss Blandford's begged Ursula's pardon for her own surrender to the riot. She—Miss Blandford—could feel their merriment spinning like a noisy ball inside the vast cosmic globe of Ursula's serenity. And, just as the noise was at its height, another figure stood looking over the half-door.

Miss Blandford was the first to observe it. She had been trying to read Gilbert Murray's translations of Greek plays, and the thought that darted immediately into her mind was, "The Messenger!" Fate seemed for her to embody itself in the short stiff figure which stood for a moment outlined against the livid sky. Annie was the first to recognise its arrival. She gave a shout.

"Here's our family death's-head! Come on, Prue! Fancy you turning up to pay your compliments to Her Royal Majesty the Queen of the May!"

Paying no attention to her sister's badinage, Prue pushed open the door and came in. As she closed it behind her, she dropped a cane basket at her feet.

"Lord love a duck—the girl's got the sack!" exploded Annie. "Who's got you into trouble, Prue?" she sneered, knowing her sister's attitude of cold disapproval towards the other sex. "Tell your sisters—they'll make him make an honest girl of you!"

"Annie!" Miss Blandford started violently. She could never have imagined Ursula's voice holding that note. "Hold your tongue! What have you come for, Prue?"

Prue Devoke stood by the door and folded her arms. Miss Blandford, who had never seen the girl before, thought what a cold, dislikeable creature she seemed, a small smile peeped at the corners of her mouth, her dark eyes slipped snakishly about the room, as if it pleased her to bring her news into a place where there was so much merry-making.

"You may as well take off your finery, Annie, and put it away; whoever's Queen of the May to-morrow, it won't be you!"

"What——!" began Annie, making a dive at Prue; Ursula caught her wrist and jerked her back.

"Be quiet! Why can't you say what you've got to say?" Her eyes blazed at Prue, but it was not Prue that they saw, but a basket of roses and chrysanthemums, tied up with a tinsel ribbon.

"*Mother!*" cried an agonised voice. "Have you forgotten? Miss Blandford's here!"

"We'll go," muttered Miss Blandford, rising and

gripping the arm of the highly reluctant Lovekin, to propel her to the door.

Prue looked up at their faces with her little, malign eyes.

"I shouldn't bother, mum," she said. "You may as well know now as later. You'd better get your hat, mother, and maybe you'll catch the bus to Todmarket. Father's in the lock-up at Todmarket, for——" She paused. Mildred had screamed. Prue hated her father, hated him for what he had done, and what he had brought upon them. It was because her hate momentarily choked her that she broke off, although Miss Blandford, judging from the expression on her face, thought it was the girl's demoniacal enjoyment of the situation that prolonged their agony. She thumped her stick on the ground.

"For what, girl?" she cried, in a formidable voice.

Prue looked up at her.

"And the woman he threw the vitriol in the face of is in Todmarket hospital," she concluded.

CHAPTER XII

WITH A smothered exclamation, Miss Blandford moved instinctively towards Ursula ; but, quick as she was, Annie was before her. She had her mother in her arms, and, regardless of the starched frills, was pressing Ursula's head down on her bosom. Mildred began a high, tearless whimpering, and Lovekin's mouth was drawn down in an expressive curve. Her sidelong glance at Miss Blandford said, " Come along—let's get out of this ; Bohemianism's all very well, but when it's just an ordinary, sordid, village tragedy——"

Miss Blandford addressed herself to Annie, whom she found herself liking very much. The papier mâché crown sat oddly above the girl's whitened face ; it was obvious that she was trying very hard to be calm.

" Is there any way—anything I can do—to be of use ? "

" I—I don't think so," stammered Annie.

" Unless you've got a motor-car you can take mother to Todmarket in," put in Prue, with cold common sense. " I should think she's sure to miss the bus."

" I haven't a car of my own, but I will order one at once," said Miss Blandford, trying to disguise her revulsion from Prue. " Where's Fenny ? She'll go——"

"Oh, I couldn't!"

Miss Blandford stared; for the moment she had forgotten that she loved Fenny, that she was thinking of adopting her.

"Why on earth not?"

"I couldn't," repeated Fenny, her eyes glazed, her lips stiffened, and her fingers twisting themselves together in the old familiar fashion. As Miss Blandford continued to stare at her, she hunched her shoulder and slunk out of sight behind the other girls. Miss Blandford felt taken aback, in some way deserted. She looked sharply at the others.

"Don't any of you want to help your mother?"

"I'll go," said Lovekin suddenly.

Mildred came creeping to Miss Blandford's side; with the ring of pale, girls' faces staring up at her, Miss Blandford found herself suddenly in charge of the situation. They were all stunned, as well they might be, poor things. She laid her hand on Ursula's shoulder gently.

"I'll come with you, if you'll have me, you poor soul."

Ursula raised her head; her face was mottled with purple in uncertain patches, her eyes looked as though there was a pain behind them, but she smoothed her hair with both her hands, as though determined to preserve her composure.

"It's very kind of you, ma'am. I'm sure I can manage by myself."

"You shan't do that," promised Miss Blandford.

"Can't one of you find her things?"

"Don't you move, Annie, till you've taken off

them things and put them in the box ; Fenny'll help you." Miss Blandford marvelled at the firmness of Ursula's voice, at the wisdom that held hysteria at bay by finding something definite to do. While Mildred went off to find her mother's outdoor clothing, Annie very quietly began to take off her robe and dress. Standing there in her white petticoat, with the crown still on her head, the tears rolled, despite themselves, down her cheeks. Fenny did nothing to help her, leaning against the table as if she were about to swoon. Prue picked up the discarded robe and folded it smartly, patting down the material almost as though the action gave her satisfaction. Ursula had gone to the sink to wash her hands and face. Miss Blandford stood a little apart, touched by the way that they all accepted her into their intimacy. They had shed the little nervous, polite mannerisms that they assumed involuntarily in self-protection against "the gentry," and treated her as one of themselves—excepting Fenny : who still stood with her head twisted away, doing nothing, saying nothing to help anyone.

"Will you put on your boots, mother ? " Mildred was asking.

"She won't need them in the car," said Miss Blandford. "Are any of you coming with us ? "

"No," said Ursula, suddenly and decisively. "This isn't a business for them ; their father wouldn't like it. You'll have to sleep with Fenny, Prue, if you're stopping."

"Oh, I'm stopping right enough," said Prue ironically.

"You haven't asked her all about it yet, mother!" cried Mildred.

Ursula shook her head, pinning on her old-fashioned hat before the glass.

"Your father'll tell me all about it," she answered proudly. "I don't want it from none other lips but his."

The girls exchanged glances behind their mother's back, and Miss Blandford felt a prickling in her eyes.

"Are you ready?" she asked. The car was at the door; the girls came silently down to the gate to see their mother get in. Miss Blandford stepped after her.

"Where are you going?" cried Lovekin, taken aback by this unexplained proceeding.

"Todmarket," said Miss Blandford, choking back the inclination to answer "Mind your own business!" as a *quid pro quo* for the times Lovekin had sailed off without explaining her departure.

"But what about dinner?" shrieked Lovekin.

"Damn dinner!" snapped Miss Blandford, glaring at the astonished and disapproving face of Lovekin. Let her disapprove—and damn *her*! At last she—Miss Blandford—had found a human being real and true and faithful—a faithful heart. She put out her own shapely brown hand and covered the roughened back of Ursula's, as it lay on her lap. Ursula looked up, a little surprised; the flush of her departure having died away, her face looked small and grey.

"I think you're wonderful, my dear."

"Excuse me," said Ursula; the car had just

swung slowly into a lane so narrow that the hedge-row branches tapped against the windows. "Did you ever notice, ma'am, those three oak-trees there?"

"Indeed I have; I call them the Prince of Wales's feathers," answered Miss Blandford, thinking that Ursula's shock, and her self-control, had made her a little light-headed.

"That's a pretty name," said Ursula. "To me they're just a man and two women. Do you see? The middle one's the man—all grand and straight and proud; and those are the two women, bending a bit out of his way. They've got to keep the north-east winds away from him and the rain from battering the young leaf-buds in spring. They've got to get in the way of the lightning and take the worse of the snow. That's women's business, isn't it, ma'am?—so's a man can just get on with the work of being himself and making a home for his children."

Although every word of this was in direct contradiction of Miss Blandford's principles—she having been reared to believe that women were the weaker sex—wonder held her silent. Grand and straight and proud; was it possible that Ursula saw Devoke like that?—the little, common, shambling man, with the small, leering eyes, whose knowing look had often made Miss Blandford want to drive her fist between them, when he stood, so hypocritically humble, for her orders?

As the car ran with a snort from the lane into the main road, the farther horizon danced for a moment in an abrupt light.

"I'm afraid the storm's coming up quickly," said Miss Blandford. "I hope you don't mind lightning?—aren't frightened by it?"

The quiet smile passed across Ursula's face.

"No more'n the tree," she answered.

As soon as the girls were left alone in the cottage, Annie flew at Prue, hitting her about the ears and head, in a seemingly lunatic paroxysm of rage. Prue defended herself as best she could, but was getting the worst of it, when Mildred's whine broke into Annie's consciousness.

"Oh, for goodness' sake, why can't you leave her alone? She's done nothing, has she?"

"What did you want to come blurting it out at mother like that for, you little beast?" sobbed Annie, desisting more out of breathlessness than for any other reason. She dropped into a chair, and, laying her head on her arms, began to cry in great bawling gulps, like a child. Prue stood holding her ill-treated ears, eyeing Annie malevolently. "Now I shan't be the May Queen and Phil Longton won't ask me to wed him!" howled Annie, voicing her secret griefs; it was the first time her sisters had heard of Phil Longton.

"Oh, well, we're all in the same boat—here's Prue lost her job, haven't you, Prue?—and goodness knows what Jack will say; perhaps he'll leave me," said Mildred, suddenly seeing a way out of her domestic difficulties. "Where's Fenny? You know where the things are, Fenny—why don't you make

us a cup of tea? Nothing's too bad if you've got a cup of tea to take your mind off it."

"Is that what you found when you were poorly?" mumbled Annie, resenting this summary dismissal of her woes.

"Just you mind your tongue and remember I'm older than you. Oh, go on, Fenny—get us some tea, can't you?"

"I can't," said Fenny, in a dull voice. She was seated, looking straight ahead of her, with her palms turned upward on her knees. Mildred stared contemptuously at her, then dragged herself to her feet.

"*Flab!*" she sneered. "Come on, Annie—do you know where mother keeps things?—And if you aren't equal to making a cup of tea, perhaps it won't be troubling you too much to light the lamp?"

Prue stopped rubbing her ears and took the lampshade off, sniffing. It was the truth that Fenny could not move. She was still numb, still stupefied by the force of the shock. Her brain was a blank; she wanted it to remain a blank; she was afraid that by moving about, by doing familiar things, she would rouse herself to realisation of the horror that coiled itself round the edge of her consciousness. She hardly breathed: her lips, which had gone bluish, were parted a little; her eyes started a little between the withdrawn lids.

"Oh, stop it, Fenny—acting as if you've seen a ghost!" Mildred had turned from putting the kettle on. Annie, mopping her eyes, stumbled to a cupboard and got out four cups without saucers, a

tea-caddy, and sugar-basin. The lamp-wick rose, filling the room with orange light ; by mutual instinct the girls did not look at one another. Annie's tears spurted afresh at the sight of the folded purple plush, but she gulped them back. She looked at the clock.

"Time you and me was getting back to the bus," she said to Mildred.

"*I'm* not going back," announced Mildred. "Not likely ! With Archover talking itself hoarse and Jack—you know what he'll be like. He and father never got on——" The word *father* sounded so strange that she stopped suddenly.

"And I don't suppose they'll be any too glad to see *you* at Bramble," stabbed Prue, folding her hands virtuously in her lap.

"Me ? What d'you mean ? What's it got to do with me ?" gasped Annie. Mildred looked at her almost pityingly.

"Your old ladies are pretty strait-laced, aren't they ? I shouldn't be so anxious to go back till you're sent for, if I was you."

"Do you mean I'll lose my place—like Prue ?"

"It looks as if Fenny will be supporting the whole lot of you before she's finished ! Looks a likely person to support a fly, doesn't she ? Wake up, Fenny—you're the family wage-earner now, do you hear ?" said Mildred, not ill-naturedly.

"It won't be long before I get another place," asserted Prue conceitedly.

"Oh, indeed, Miss Stuck-Up ? And who do you think's going to run after you ?"

"You mind your own business and I'll mind mine," retorted Prue.

"You've always done that ! It must have come cheap at a bob a week !" cried Annie, with unwonted bitterness, for her: The spectre of poverty seemed coldly to enter the room, to stand among them all. Their fear, their dread of the unknown, their inability to see the situation in all its implications, sharpened their irritation and drove them to carping at each other. The kettle boiled, and Annie made the tea ; the three girls drew their chairs up to the table, where Fenny was already seated. She took no notice of the cup that was set at her elbow ; the others buried their faces and drank deep. Then they seemed to gather courage to look at one another ; their strained faces, lit by the lamp, raised themselves, and Annie and Mildred both looked at Prue.

"Well, you might as well tell us all about it now."

"I'm sure I don't know much," sniffed Prue ; her features pinched themselves together into an expression of disgust. "I *saw* him in the morning——"

"What ? With the woman ?" cried Annie, curiosity getting the better for the moment of other emotions.

"I should think *not* ! You don't suppose he'd bring *her* to the Samsons', do you ?"

"Get on," urged Mildred, her hand clenched on the edge of the table.

"That would be the one I heard about, though," said Annie triumphantly ; she and Mildred

exchanged glances. "I'll have to ask George Barnett what she looked like."

"You've got a cheek if you do!"

"What's the good of shoving your head in a bag? And I can tell you something else, anyhow. Dad had got his arm in a sling. Didn't he say anything about that when you saw him, Prue?"

"I didn't ask him," sniffed Prue.

"You wouldn't!"—from Annie.

"Oh, shut up. Go on, Prue."

"I've heard since. The Pride did it."

"Did what? Savaged *dad*?" said Annie incredulously.

"Why not?" asked Prue, with lifted eyebrows.

"The Pomp did, didn't he?"

"Ay, but Pride was different from Pomp," frowned Annie. "He and dad was friends. It must have put dad out properly."

"Shut up about the Pride. Go on about the woman, Prue."

"I don't know anything but he got her in the dry-salter's sheds down Straw Lane and threw vitriol at her."

"You do make it exciting!"

"I don't happen to find it exciting," minced Prue, in the voice she had copied from the baker's wife.

"Oo, reely! But your Mrs. Samson found it interesting enough to give you the sack, didn't she?" retorted Annie, copying Prue's affected accent.

"She was very kind, and explained that with the children in the house she didn't want a lot of gossip, so she gave me three pounds——"

"What?"

"She gave me three pounds," repeated Prue, "and said I'd better go before everybody started talking about it." She tossed her head. "And she said the three pounds was to help me in case her cousin at Reading she's going to write to can't give me a place. But it's a hotel, so I'm pretty sure to go there."

"Then you can just hand over the three pounds to mother! If you don't, I'll make you!"

"Oh, give over, you two!" wailed Mildred. "Is that all you know, honest, Prue?"

"All but she's been with him all the time he's been away—he picked her up in some show or other," said Prue disgustedly.

"My goodness, I wonder if it's the same fair——"

"Poor old dad!" muttered Annie. Both of her sisters turned on her like furies.

"Poor old dad? Dirty old beast, treating us like that behind our backs"—"Doing me out of my job"—"Making me so's I can't go back to my own husband!" Their voices mingled in shrill disclaimer of Annie's sentiments.

"And hasn't he paid for it?" shouted Annie, striking the table with her clenched fist.

"And what about her?"

"She deserves to pay. I'll bet she led dad on—any woman could," said Annie, with sage recognition of her father's weakness.

"If you're one of them that blames the woman, I'm not," said Mildred coldly.

"Nor me"—from Prue.

"Oh, you!" Annie's eyes rested scornfully on her youngest sister. "You'd better hold your tongue. You've got fish-glue in you—not blood."

"My goodness, what'll mother be thinking?" whispered Mildred.

"Mother doesn't think—she feels," retorted Annie.

"I'll bet she does! Why, even if it was Jack—not that I care much for him now——" Mildred broke off, biting her lip; she had not meant to admit so much to her sisters. But everything had gone to pieces. "It's rotten for mother. I mean, after the silly way she's always gone on about dad—making out he was a kind of angel——"

"Ay, it's always a mistake to make out men are angels," said Annie, with premature wisdom. "I could have told ma a thing or two twelve months ago."

"So could I—earlier than that!"

"I don't see any need for talking about it," said Prue, in her Mrs. Samson voice.

"Gawd! It's rotten for all of us, isn't it, Annie?" breathed Mildred, appealing naturally to Annie for sympathy.

"I don't know about you; it's rotten if the rest of us are going to be out of work. I suppose they'll keep you on at Jacksons', Fenny?—Fenny! Wake up! Don't you hear me talking to you?"

"I hear," said Fenny, in a distant voice. Her face began to twist itself; her eyes rolled, her expression altered, became almost lewd. Her lips loosened; she began to speak in a low, hot voice. "He took her into fields and lay with her in the grass! They

got into barns and did things in the dark ! He stroked her——”

“ For goodness’ sake shut up, Fenny ! ” cried Annie, aghast.

Fenny went on ; sitting slightly forward, the words seemed to pour themselves out of her mouth, without any volition on her part ; she was in some kind of a trance ; she used words, expressions, that even Mildred had not heard, but they were unmistakable in their evil suggestion. Prue had risen to her feet and stood gaping. Mildred shook Fenny’s shoulders violently.

“ Fenny ! What are you saying ? Be quiet ! Remember—remember Prue’s here ! ” The tradition of Prue’s youngest-ness revived.

At last Annie thrust her hand roughly over her sister’s mouth. Fenny bit feebly at the restraining hand, then she began to laugh. Her smothered laughter broke into shrill peals as she dragged Annie’s hand away from her mouth, and filled the kitchen.

“ For God’s sake, Prue, shut the window. We’ll have all the neighbours in ! ” whispered Mildred. Prue moved hastily to do her bidding. A few more shrieks, and Fenny dropped, face forwards, on the floor, and lay there, with traces of foam gathering at the corners of her mouth.

The two girls carried her upstairs and put her into bed ; Mildred found the hot-water bottle and pushed it down to her feet. Presently she seemed to recover, looked round, recognised them both, and twisted her face into the pillow away from them.

"Well, would you ever have thought it of our Fenny?" whispered Mildred, when they returned to the kitchen, where Prue, with an air of self-conscious virtue, was wiping the cups. "Fancy our Miss Prunes-and-Prism knowing all them words! If that doesn't show you still waters run deep!" She gave a little laugh, partly of awkwardness, partly of satisfaction. "At any rate, she won't be able to take up her too-good-to-live airs with us any more!"

"I never heard such language in my life!" sniffed Prue.

"Then the sooner you forget it the better. What have you pulled the curtains for?" demanded Annie. Like the majority of cottagers, the Devokes did not shroud their windows at night.

"Because there's half the village out in the street, spying on us. I guess the news has come over from Brambledown."

"It's a wonder they haven't been knocking on the door. I'll clear them off if they do—a lot of Nosey Parkers!" promised Mildred. "Here, Annie, where are me and you going to sleep to-night? Our old bed's in the shed."

"We'd better get it, and you and Prue can share it; Fenny's better by herself, and I'm going to sleep with mother, if she'll have me."

"I wonder what time she'll get back? It was kind of that Miss Blandford to take her—though you had a sauce, Prue, to mention the motor-car!" A knock at the closed door interrupted her. "Well—here's the first of the Paul Prys! Listen to me dealing with 'em," announced Mildred, and threw open the door

upon the Rector. Her defensive attitude collapsing, Mildred, with a muttered "Good evening, sir," backed into the room : but not before she had seen, at a respectful distance behind the Rector, a ring of faces, unequally lit by the light from the cottage doorway. The faces dodged back into darkness as they saw Mildred's eyes fixed upon them. Annie and Prue saw them as well, and in a moment of revelation the girls saw what their lives were to be like henceforward, and a little chill gathered about their hearts. Mildred closed the door ; Annie stood, very red ; Prue, very prim and grey.

The Rector advanced, clearing his throat, with hands outspread.

"My poor children . . ."

Prue began to cry noisily ; this, at last, was an atmosphere in which she felt at home. Annie stood with hanging head, nervously plaiting the fringe of the tablecloth. She was glad Ursula was not there.

It was getting on for ten o'clock before Ursula returned ; they heard the arrival of the car, and Miss Blandford's strong voice saying "Good night" at the gate.

"I'll see you in the morning, Ursula ; if you want anything earlier, send Fenny round."

"Good night. Thank you, ma'am." How steady Ursula's voice sounded ; but to Annie at least it was no longer her mother's voice, but the voice of an old woman. On the other side of the fence they caught the sound of a surreptitious scraping of feet, but the presence of Miss Blandford evidently kept intruders

at bay, for Ursula's footsteps came straight up to the cottage door.

"Why, are you all here still?" Her eyes, set in deep rings, and rusted with unshed tears, took in the presence of Mildred and Annie with a stern surprise. They felt foolish, mumbled something, to which she paid no attention. "Annie! Why aren't you back at Bramble?"

"If they've heard about—if they've heard, ma, they won't be expecting me," muttered Annie.

"I'm surprised at you—and the long holiday you've just had and all! You'll be off as soon as you've had your breakfast to-morrow morning, my girl!"

"Jack's not expecting me, mother," said Mildred, hastily anticipating Ursula's reproof. "I said I might spend the night over here—for a change," she added hurriedly, trying to make it sound likely.

"You're not telling me the truth, either of you. I'm surprised at you. Do you want folks to say you're ashamed to look them in the face?"

"It wasn't that, ma——" Annie was beginning.

"You can't expect us to go on ordinary, as if nothing had happened," put in Prue's cold voice.

Then they saw Ursula sag suddenly, as though a spring had come uncoiled.

"I'm tired, I think," she whispered, as though the fact surprised her as much as the conduct of her daughters. "I'm going to bed. Your bed's out in the shed, Mildred and Annie; you'll have to get it out for yourselves."

"We've got it ready, ma, in the apple-room;

Prue's going to share it with Mildred—because Fenny's not very well. I thought I'd sleep with you, ma, if you'd have me."

"No," said Ursula, and her tired body drew itself to a point of decision. "No, thank you, I mean, dearie. I'll be best alone. The three of you'll have to pack together, if Fenny's sleeping by herself."

They heard her slow steps heavily ascending the stairs.

"She's not told us a word," whispered Mildred.

"Maybe she will to-morrow. She doesn't look as awful as I thought she would, does she, Mildred?"

"No. But do you think it's sent her a bit crazy? She seems to think we should just go on as usual——"

"It won't make much difference what she *thinks*: nothing's going to be as usual," mourned Mildred.

"We forgot to say anything about supper to her. Do you suppose she's hungry?"

"I'll take her up a cup of milk when I'm undressed."

"Well, I suppose we'd better be turning in; it'll be a nice squash, the three of us together."

"Bags I the middle," said Annie.

When she went upstairs, a few minutes later, with the cup of milk in her hand, she found the door bolted against her.

"I've brought you some milk, ma."

"I don't want anything, thank you, dearie."

"But you'll feel poorly in the night——!"

"Say good night to the others for me—I forgot," came the answer in the old but steady voice, "Good night. God bless you, Annie."

STALLION

"God bless you, ma," choked Annie.

Darkness and silence up above.

In the apple-room, Mildred's and Annie's whispers and conjectures continued long after Prue's level breathing had told them she was asleep.

CHAPTER XIII

SITTING silently side by side, swaying a little to the movement of the well-sprung car, no uninstructed person would have taken the two women for other than a lady with, perhaps, her confidential maid, returning, rather late, from a shopping expedition. When, here and there, a rustic face lit up with recognition and a gleam of the morbid excitement which the sight of an actor in a tragedy brings to the eyes of insensitive people, Ursula made no movement of shrinking or withdrawal : she even smiled absently, performing, as it were habitually, her act of courtesy to people who recognised her. That this was reported against her as an indecency, that they would have thought more of her if she had shrunk back, covering her face, was nothing to Ursula. It was only when they reached the outskirts of Tod-market that her hands, upon which she had drawn her cotton gloves, began to travel over one another nervously. She stole a look at Miss Blandford, and made as though to speak.

“What is it, Ursula?”

“It was only—I wondered if you’d mind, ma’am——”

“What? Anything—I mean, I don’t mind anything,” cried Miss Blandford, in an agony of nervous compassion : one might have said that the tragedy was hers, instead of Ursula’s.

"If we went to the hospital first? You see," explained Ursula, "I think he'd maybe like to know I'd seen her. You see—Jim's kind."

Sudden visualisation of the obscene deed drew the flesh in Miss Blandford's cheeks; she felt her mouth go dry, and wondered if she could possibly be going to make a fool of herself by fainting.

"I mean," pursued Ursula, carefully, "he wasn't himself when he did it. He'd not hurt beast nor human when he's himself, wouldn't Jim—not when he's himself. Of course, they'll see that, in the court," she added, with a sudden, desperate defiance.

Miss Blandford leaned forward and spoke down the tube; the car braked suddenly, backed a little, and swung into a side road, an only partly finished thoroughfare, bordered with the small, pretentious villas of well-to-do Todmarket tradesfolk. At the end, converting the road into a blind alley, opened the iron gates of the Todmarket Cottage Hospital, a low red-brick building silhouetted against a group of pines.

When, after the necessary preliminaries, which were carried through by Miss Blandford in her usual high-handed fashion, Ursula departed in charge of a ward sister, Miss Blandford and the matron faced each other in the latter's sitting-room. Miss Blandford had taken an instant dislike to the matron, whom she recognised at a glance as a woman of the limited outlook and imagination of the lower middle-classes: jealous of her authority, and touchy with her superiors. Ursula would have had a poor time had she been alone.

"Are the injuries serious?" she asked shortly.

The matron pursed her lips. If you don't know as much as that about vitriol, said her eyebrows, you must be a fool.

"Oh, yes, they're serious," she replied contemptuously.

"To what extent—I mean——" Miss Blandford lost her temper. "Not being in the habit of using vitriol to settle my disputes, I happen to be ignorant of its effect."

"Oh, well, vitriol—which is sulphuric acid, you know—chars all organic substances," answered the matron loftily. "On the skin it produces dreadful burns and sores that may take weeks to heal. The facial disfigurement lasts for life, and, in bad cases, may mean wearing a mask. Of course, the minutest drop in the eye means blindness," she concluded. Miss Blandford looked at her with abhorrence; the woman actually spoke unctuously, as if she enjoyed describing horrors.

"And in the present instance?" she whispered.

"Oh, in the present instance," replied the matron, in an offhand manner, "the burns are on the left side of the head, the lower cheek, the neck, and part of the shoulder." She recited it after the style of the multiplication table, adding, with a note almost of regret in her voice, "the eyes haven't been touched."

"I see. I suppose that means a long job?"

"As far as we're concerned, it can't be a long job," retorted the matron tartly. "This hospital is, as you probably know, entirely for local patients. We've got a dozen applicants for her bed, waiting

to come in now. Of course, the shock's got a good deal to do with it ; some get over it quicker than others——”

“ You speak as if you've been dealing with vitriol burnings all your life ! ”

“ *On* the contrary. It happens to be my first experience of one. I *certainly* hope it will be my last. I'm glad to say such things don't come in our way here. I very much dislike these sensational cases. And it's not good for the other patients—to say nothing of the fact that our ordinary people don't at *all* like the idea of having a woman of *that* class among them. Todmarket is *very* respectable,” she ended, with an air of marked self-satisfaction, as though she, and she only, were responsible for Todmarket's respectability.

“ So you will get rid of the blot on your respectability as soon as possible ? ” sneered Miss Blandford. I'll bet the woman goes to a Baptist chapel, she thought : she has just that manner of special acquaintance with the Almighty !

“ If she's not fit to be sent out at the end of the week the doctors will probably get her transferred to one of the county hospitals,” snapped the matron, with a vicious glance of reproof.

“ I think I'll go and wait outside for Mrs. Devoke,” said Miss Blandford, turning on her heel. The matron's manner altered abruptly : seeing her opportunity escaping her, she became eager for confidences.

“ So that's the man's wife, is it ! Fancy that now ! And what has she got to say about it all ? ” Her voice

had sunk to a whisper, her eyes plunged eagerly into Miss Blandford's.

"Precisely nothing," Miss Blandford took pleasure in replying, as she went towards the door followed by the matron.

"But how did it all happen? Had he been carrying on with her a long time? Did his wife know?"

"I should think you will have plenty of opportunity for finding out all the details from your patient," returned Miss Blandford. "Kindly inform Mrs. Devoke, when she comes back, that I am waiting in the car. Good evening."

She sat, burning with furious resentment, until Ursula joined her.

"Are you all right, Ursula? That filthy woman! Did she bother you?" she cried.

"What woman would that be, ma'am?" inquired Ursula, wide-eyed.

"That beast of a matron!"

"She asked me some questions, but I told her I was afraid I couldn't tell her anything until I had seen Jim. It's natural folks should want to know," said Ursula quietly. "I suppose we'll be going to the police station now, ma'am?"

She had stood beside a bed round which a screen had been drawn. There was very little to be seen: something that lay stiffly, at incredible length, under the white hospital coverlet; something that ended in swathed folds of bandage, robbed of its human characteristics, anonymous, under the temporary effects of the drug that had given it relief from its torture.

Ursula stood there, trying to imagine that Jim had loved and hated this thing, so stiff and helpless—and failing, because it so resembled a tall puppet—a blanket-ghost, as the country people called the scarecrow figure that children made out of a sheeted pole and a turnip lantern round about Guy Fawkes' Day, and carried round the lanes to frighten the simple after nightfall—that she could not fancy a man handling such a thing, save in jest. Only a tuft of living hair had sprung from the bandage on the right side of the head. Fixing her eyes upon it, she tried to see the woman to whom it belonged, the woman Jim had loved while he was away from her ; the women who had made him send her a postcard, with roses and chrysanthemums, and a bow of tinsel. She had a momentary desire to seize that tuft of savage hair and tear it out by the roots ; then there would be nothing left but the blanket-ghost. Sighing a little, she seemed to rouse herself from a nightmare, and turned towards the sister, who was watching her with compassionate eyes. The ward was filled with a tension of listening ears.

“ Is the poor thing ruined for life ? ” asked Ursula.

“ Oh, it's not quite as bad as that,” returned the sister, eagerly. “ It might have been much worse. She might have lost her sight, you know.”

“ Eh, that would be a terrible thing ; not to see the spring and the summer again,” said Ursula, speaking as though to herself. The sister thought, as Miss Blandford had done, that her trouble had slightly unbalanced Ursula's mind. But the quick glance Ursula turned upon her the next moment

showed her that she was mistaken. "You'll be kind and tender to her while she's here. Maybe it'll be for a long time."

"We'll do everything we can," promised the sister, smiling kindly at Ursula. "But she can't be here very long, you know. As soon as she's fit to be moved she'll have to be looked after at home."

"Oh, yes—at home," echoed Ursula, but the look in her eyes grew vaguely troubled.

"That'll be over Great Beare way, I suppose?" suggested the sister, not quite able to conceal her own curiosity.

"Over Great Beare way; I dare say," answered Ursula vaguely. She looked back at the featureless thing on the bed. "She's asleep now, isn't she?"

"Not asleep," corrected the sister. "The doctor gave her a drug, to make her forget the pain for a little." She cast rather an anxious glance at the bed, for she knew that the effects of the drug could not last much longer; had Ursula arrived half an hour later it would have been impossible to have allowed her to see her.

"The pain's bad?" asked Ursula.

The sister nodded; no point in saying *how* bad. She was a gentle girl; she felt a tightening in her breast as she looked at Ursula.

"And it'll last a long time?"

"We don't quite know how long," she prevaricated. "I think, perhaps, you'd better go now."

"Am I disturbing folks?" asked Ursula, as she came round the end of the screen; seemingly innumerable pairs of eyes, with varying degrees of

expression in them, were fixed upon her ; more than one of the patients was hoping she would be out of hospital in time to hear the trial. Ursula hurried humbly down the ward.

There were not many difficulties at the police station. Everyone seemed to be a little flustered, the sergeant uncertain of the correct procedure. It was many years since they had had a criminal case to deal with at Todmarket ; he was still awaiting instructions from his superiors. Meanwhile, Ursula, who was slightly known, was received with respect and compassion, the sergeant removing his helmet to scratch his head and say that so far's he saw there couldn't be any harm in her having a word with Jim. While Ursula passed through the door that led to the cells, Miss Blandford sat down on a bench and drew her cigarette case out of her pocket. A very young, pink-faced policeman obliged her with a match ; no one spoke to her, for which she was grateful.

" I don't know properly if I'm doing the right thing," mumbled the sergeant, as he unlocked a door, " but I don't mind risking it—seeing as it's Jim. 'Ere, Jim, 'ere's your missus come for a word with you," he called into the cell. Ursula passed him ; as a last concession he pushed a chair in after her to sit on, and left them together, jerking a thumb to a subordinate, to remain on guard in the passage.

The harsh yellow light of the unshaded bulb picked out the details of the scene : the walls, with their

sordid scribblings, colour-washed a brownish purple ; the stone floor ; the worn plank at the farther end—there was not much to see, save the man who sagged like a bundle of empty clothing in the corner of the plank.

All the way here she had imagined their meeting : had schooled herself to composure, for fear, by some innocent breaking of the law, she should make it worse for him ; but, when she saw that sagging body, with its head lolling on its chest, with its arm in a filthy sling, so abject, so hopeless, so indifferent to her presence, her heart leapt out of her body and crossed the dividing space between them. The open door and the listener in the passage faded from her consciousness : she was crouched beside him on the plank, her arms tenderly around him, pressing his poor, bewildered face into her breast, crooning over him as over a sick child.

“ My poor old Jim ! My old Jim ! What have they done to you ? ”

Her clutch, tender and loving as it was, made him wince ; he put his hand to her shoulder. Tears gushed from Ursula's eyes as she opened his shirt and saw the crusted bandage that ran round his upper arm and chest. She rose at once, and, going to the door, asked the man on duty politely if he would oblige her with a little warm water and a rag. When they were brought she soaked the bandage until it came away from the inflamed wound, which she bathed again and again. All this time Jim did not say one word.

The change in him pierced her like a knife ; he

seemed emptied of himself—of all the bluster and clumsy waggishness and lustfulness that had mastered her and made her his own. He kept his head turned from her, watching the slow ministering movements of her hands.

“Jim——”

“You’ve come, have you, Urse?” He spoke thickly, like a man half asleep.

“Of course I’ve come, Jim.” She took courage from the sound of his voice, although it was as a stranger’s voice, drained of all that she remembered of him. “Tell me—tell Ursula,” she whispered, between the kisses she pressed on the thin, dishevelled hair that seemed a part of his pathos—so jaunty he kept it as a rule, watered down from the parting, with the front lock combed round into a meagre but saucy quiff.

Presently he pushed her away from him—not roughly, but as though he could bear no more of her tenderness.

“That’ll do, Urse.” He pushed his hands over his face and head, as if by doing so he could rid his brain of some of its confusion. He stole a shamefaced look at her, then looked hurriedly away. “You’re a good old wife, Urse.”

“You know I’ve never loved none but you, Jim,” she answered, intending no reproach and perceiving none, until he cowered away from her. She reached out her hand and touched him softly on the knee. “Women are made that way when they care for a man, Jim. Maybe it’s different with men.”

"Ay, it's different," he agreed dully, and something rose in her throat and strangled her, but she forced her hand to remain there, although she knew that the love that had betrayed her was not dead and that henceforth her only share in him was to be the share of her motherhood. Jim and she were no longer man and woman to each other. She contemplated the future with a heart gone cold.

"I'd better try and tell you—as far's I remember."

"I knew something'd gone wrong when I got your postcard," she could not refrain from telling him. He stared unseeingly ahead of him, as if he had not heard ; it did not occur to him, as it might have done to a more subtle individual, to be a little glad that catastrophe had not found her entirely unprepared. "I'd ha' got through somehow—if the Pride hadn't gone back on me.

"I can't——" He choked suddenly, and his face began to work, the thin moustache twisting itself ludicrously over his mouth. A cry broke out of him and he buried his head in his right arm. "I can't hear aught but the way she shrieked and squealed when I chucked the stuff at her. 'Twas worse than a shot hare ; 'twas worse than a horse with its leg broken ; 'twas the way devils——"

"Hush, hush, be quiet now——" she rocked him again in her arms. "'Tis all right, she's not squealing now ; she's fast asleep."

At first he did not take in the meaning of her words.

"Fast asleep in bed, with the bandages round her all neat and tidy," crooned Ursula.

"How do you know?" He raised his bleared face in mystification.

"I went to see her; I thought maybe you'd like to know I'd seen her, and that she was looked after like a queen, and only a bit of her burned—not the eyes at all."

"Is that God's truth?"

"Did I ever lie to you?"

He muttered something inaudible.

"What's to become of her?"

"They'll nurse her till she's fit to leave, and then she'll be looked after wherever she lives," promised Ursula.

He made an incredulous noise, but for the moment he let the matter drop. He was comforted, as Ursula had foreseen, by the news she had brought; Tamar was in bed and sleeping. Almost, in the relief, he forgot his own situation. It had seemed as though those inhuman shrieks must go on for ever, that he would never get their sound out of his ears. In bed; and sleeping.

"Are you going to tell me about it, Jim?" she prompted.

Dragged back to the present, he gave a sigh, as of protest, and began blunderingly to tell her about it, from the moment when he met Tamar in the street at Clover. At first he was elliptical, self-conscious, anxious to gloze things over, vaguely ashamed that Ursula should know it all; but, as the tale went on, it was as though the spirit of Tamar entered into him once more, he lost the sense of audience, of anything but himself. He found in some way a

vocabulary in which to speak of the effect Tamar had had on him ; he managed to convey to his wife's stricken soul the impression of a man bedevilled ; she sat still as wood, listening while he told her of the things he had given Tamar—the precious, unmaterial things which it had been her pride to take of him alone, to cherish because none shared them with her. Simple though she was, she learned from his recital that this was not one of the come-day-go-day loves that he had indulged and to which she had shut her eyes : it was a thing that had come upon him like a cloud in the desert, shutting out the light of sun and moon, obscuring everything but itself, entering into him, rotting him, soul and body. And slowly she began to know that whatever might be his fate, she was bound to share it ; for was she not one flesh with him ? She closed her eyes, and asked God to help her, while his words flowed over her, each word a poisoned dart that quivered in her shrinking consciousness.

“ And when I looked at her—when I just looked at her, thinking how I'd just held her in my arms, and how she'd let me call her my true love, and how she'd taken from me the best a man can give a woman—ay, and never stopped tormenting me till she got it—and when I saw her cruel white face sneering at me in the half-light, something burst in my head. It seemed queer that Harry had just shown me the bottle, and me handling it a minute before, and thinking how heavy it was. I'd only to stretch out my hand—and then it seemed as if she'd seen what was in my mind, for she jumped at me, like a

cat, with the knife in her hand—and then I suppose I must have slung the bottle at her——”

“She might have been blinded, but she wasn’t,” murmured Ursula. At that moment she felt herself almost capable of picking up the acid and pouring it over the woman as she lay there helpless, for what she had done to Jim ; that her body might have been burnt as she had burnt his soul. She pressed her hands tightly against her breast, forcing herself not to say the bitter things that came into her mind. There was a long silence.

“They’ll be taking me to Archover to-morrow,” he said numbly.

The gall melted ; she drew him towards her again, stroking him as one might stroke an injured animal.

“It will be all right if you tell the magistrate what you’ve told me, Jim,” she assured him—trying to convince him and herself at the same time.

“They tell me I’ll have to go to the ’Sizes. Do you know what a man gets for vitriol-throwing ? It’s the one crime they’ll never let a chap off light for. The judges are hard as nails on it. Eighteen months anyhow—that’s what the sergeant told me.”

She drew a deep, quivering breath.

“But it’ll make a big difference who you get to speak on your side,” said Ursula, trying to be confident. “I’ve heard some of them lawyers can get a man off even if he’s murdered somebody——”

“Ay, murder’s not so bad, though, either way,” answered Jim. “You get it over, and then they get you over. It’s what I’d have done, if I’d been right in my head at the time.”

"Jim!" she cried, horrified.

"Ay, I'd have killed her, so' no other chap could have the heaven and the hell of her, the way I had. The way things are, what'll I have but to sit in gaol, thinking of some other chap handling her, kissing her—being father to my child——"

"Is she going to have a baby?" cried Ursula.

"There's not been much time to find out yet, has there? She may have," he muttered. Suddenly he twisted his body round in Ursula's arms and stared wildly into her face. "Urse, she's got nowhere to go to; she's got no roof nor bed; will you be kind to her, for my sake?"

"I'll do what I can, Jim," she faltered. Neither of them perceived anything atrocious in the demand.

"God bless you, Urse." He looked at her out of the corner of his eye, wanting, but not daring, to say more.

"And will it be only her you'll think of, when they've taken you away, Jim?"

"You don't want me to think of you," he grunted, embarrassed.

"I'll not think of anyone but you," she answered.

"I'll not forget you, Urse."

Even though you've stopped loving me, her heart added.

"Nobody'd be as kind as you. There isn't a drop of kindness in all her body," he broke out passionately. "Why should a man love that sort of a woman? What does it mean?"

"Maybe we'll know later on, when it's all over

and you come back to me," she answered. He looked at her again sidelong. Those were the words he had wanted to hear her say. "Come back to me." Somewhere to go back to. Somewhere to crawl into like a sick beast, and heal one's wounds. Lick oneself until they stopped smarting—all but that deep, incurable gash that nothing could get at, out of which, slowly, slowly, one's lifeblood was draining until the end came with the last drop.

"The blue hive swarmed while you were away, Jim," she said suddenly.

"Ay?" He tried to be interested in the blue hive, because he felt he owed her as much.

"It'll be a good year for the bees; the honey'll pay the rent," she added, thinking to console him with trivial things. He turned his head away from her sharply; it was a relief to her to hear the sergeant's cough in the passage.

"That means you'll have to be going, Urse."

"Will they let me see you at Archover?"

"I don't know." He shook his head, as ignorant as she of prison regulations. "It's not to be expected they'll be the same as here, where they know me."

"They'd never keep me away from you!" she cried, flinging her arms about his neck in sudden despair. "They'd not be cruel like that!"

"Don't, Urse—you'll have them talking about us——"

The sergeant cleared his throat once more, and appeared in the doorway.

"Time's up, missus," he said kindly, and even

made a little joke. "The lady's smoked all her cigarettes and she wants to be getting home to her supper."

She passed him without a word ; Miss Blandford rose stiffly from her bench, and looked sharply at Ursula, who walked blindly, little, bent, and old, with her hat pushed on to the side of her head with her last embrace. Miss Blandford straightened it gently, and took Ursula's arm.

"Come along, I'm going to get you some brandy," she said, in a low voice, as she led her down the steps of the police station. The red eye of the car winked at them, the dark blueness of the night had gathered in the street ; round the car was a cluster of curious people.

"Why, I don't need brandy !" said Ursula, making an effort to recover herself.

"If you don't I do. Have the kindness to send those people away from the car," she said over her shoulder to the young policeman, who hastened to oblige Miss Blandford at a swifter pace than that usually connected with the uniform.

He and the sergeant stood looking after the car as it glided away into the darkness.

"It's a bit of a poor look-out for Jim."

"Ay. They don't like that sort of thing in the courts."

"Pity 'e didn't serve through the war."

"Why didn't 'e ?" inquired the young policeman, with the truculence of one prevented by extreme youth from taking his place in the trenches.

"Flat feet ; they kept 'im for land service."

“ Wot difference would it ’ave made if ’e’d been a Tommy ? ”

“ Could ’ave put it down to shell-shock ; it’s wonderful what shell-shock gets a man off,” observed the sergeant sagely.

She lay in the dark, tearless, with sleep banished—for ever, she thought, from her pillow. Hearing the hours strike from the husky clock in the kitchen and the rustle of the girls’ voices in the room below. She had tried, and failed, to say her prayers. Now, with the softness of the freshly made feather bed under her, her whole being fused into an inarticulate prayer, that she might stop hating Tamar, because in hating her she could not keep her word to Jim. The keeping of her word to him had become the central force of her life ; it was to be the thing by which she lived, now that all else was withdrawn from her. Somehow or other she must watch over Tamar, even if it was from afar ; she must devise ways and means of keeping in touch with her ; she must make Tamar look upon her as a friend, confide in and trust her. Perhaps, when she was better she would find work somewhere—if her poor scarred face did not make people look upon her with horror. Unconsciously Ursula’s thoughts turned towards Miss Blandford, as to one who would be able to advise, to give practical help in this problem. A profound understanding and trust had grown up between the two women, born of their mutual capacity for silence, for taking tragedy without outcry, without clatterings and verbal superfluities.

It was the kind of thing that bridged the social gulf, and made Ursula, for all her ingrained awe of the governing classes, look upon Miss Blandford simply as a friend.

She forced herself to go on thinking about Tamar, because by doing so she could hold at bay the situation between her and Jim. The agony of their spiritual divorce was kept in the background ; she gripped her night-gown tightly with both hands, to keep herself from groping for him in the dark, from encountering that chill space where his body had lain. She could feel it beside her on the bed, just as she could feel it when, on hot summer nights, they had lain as far as possible from one another ; that superconsciousness of him had been her joy and her comfort ; from henceforth—unless she held it at bay by thinking of other things—it was to be her intimate torture. When he returned, would habit bring him to her again ? Could she bear, in the knowledge of her love, the equal knowledge that she had ceased to be anything but a habit to him ? Up to now she had believed that she could give him joy, if not equal to her own in him, at least a very special and particular joy of her own, something that he got from her alone, that had nothing to do with his dealings with other women ; but now it was she who was the “ other woman,” and Tamar who held the secret of his surrender to her and her alone.

Towards morning the storm, which had been hanging in the air all day, broke in a fusillade of artillery over her very head ; the room ran blue

STALLION

with lightning ; she heard one of the girls get up to close a window, and saw, through the crack in the door, Fenny light a candle in her little " virgin's chamber " opening out of that of her parents. Ordinarily she would have gone to Fenny, to ask if she was frightened, but she lay still, thinking that, if Fenny was frightened, she could call through to her. The fears of her children had become suddenly unimportant ; there was only one fear—the fear of a man in a prison cell. . . .

A splintering crash overhead, and suddenly, in the very heart of her clouded thoughts of Tamar and Jim, sped the thought : " I wonder if that's got the oak-trees ? "

CHAPTER XIV

THE WEEK after the police court trial took place, and Jim's case was committed to the Assizes, a strange rumour ran round the village. The air rang with gossip in those days : for the first time in history Aumbury found itself on the map, and it was bent on making the most of the occasion. And in the midst of its excitement lurked a drop of resentment that Ursula should so keep herself to herself, and not indulge the friendly curiosity of neighbours who had, at least in their own opinions, the right to be curious. It was recollected that Ursula was a "foreigner," that Jim Devoke had gone outside the village for his wife ; most people had forgotten this, for Ursula was liked by the majority and respected by all, but now the old grudge was resurrected, and barbed the comments on her unneighbourly conduct.

It wasn't decent, surely, that a woman should go ordinarily about her business after a thing like that ! Soberly trotting on her morning's shopping, giving people good day as if nothing out of the way had happened, answering the inquisitive who asked "how she was managing" with the same formula : "Nicely, thank you. Everyone's been most kindly." It was all they got out of her, in addition to the information that Jim was "going on all right." Gradually their irritation fanned itself into open resentment :

they could not forgive her because she showed no shame, because her eyes continued to meet theirs unflinchingly. Their opinion of her courage—for which they had been prepared to admire her, though it seemed a bit heartless, her never to drop a tear or heave a sigh for Jim, who, for all he was a bad lot, was her husband and the father of her children—changed to anger at her shamelessness. Since she would neither pander to their emotions nor feed their curiosity, they began to cold-shoulder her. She had only to have sat down in her kitchen, thrown her apron over her head, and called them all in to witness her sorrow, to have gained the sympathy of every woman in the village ; but that was not Ursula's way.

She developed a new quality of sternness in those days and dealt hardly with all, from her daughters to the newspaper men who came to ferret out details for their papers. And another thing they could not forgive her was her visits to the hospital. Most of the Aumbury people had friends or relations at Todmarket, and Ursula's departures and arrivals were noted at one end and confirmed at the other. Her visits to Jim's trollop shocked their sensibilities ; if going about as if nothing had happened was indecent, chasing after the trollop was worse. And her with girls of her own ! A nice example to show them ! The self-righteousness of Aumbury mounted like a wave ; never had its inhabitants been more smugly convinced of their own domestic probity. If that was how she'd carried on all these years, knowing about Jim's goings on, and

encouraging him in them by her easiness, no wonder things had fallen out the way they did.

The girls were still at home. The morning after the tragedy, Mildred had a postcard from Jack, to say she might as well stay where she was, as he had made up his mind to go to town for a bit : all this fuss and to-do about a father-in-law was going to do him no good in Archover ! Mildred read the first part aloud, suppressing the second, and tried in vain to get an expression of sympathy from her mother by saying, " Now I'll be able to stop and look after you a bit ! " Ursula closed her lips and left the room, and Mildred pulled a face at Annie. " You'd think she hated me, the way she goes on ! "

A few minutes before Annie was going reluctantly back to Bramble, a car drew up at the gate, and the Bramble housekeeper descended. She was kind, and showed her sympathy for all of them : but her mistresses would rather for the present that Annie didn't come back. Of course, it wasn't dismissal ; Annie was a good maid and so far as she, the housekeeper, went, she was ready to give her an excellent reference. But Ursula would understand how it was ; the ladies were old-fashioned and elderly ; it upset them to be brought into contact with matters of this sort.

And later in the week came the news that the place to which Mrs. Samson had recommended Prue would not be vacant before the end of the month ; so she too was forced, much against her will, to remain at the cottage. The three girls spent most of their days skulking indoors : even Annie could not

bring herself to brave village curiosity as Ursula did.

As for Fenny, she still worked for Miss Blandford ; but a change had taken place in their relationships. Perhaps it was because her thoughts and anxieties were so fully with Ursula that Miss Blandford no longer found Fenny sympathetic. Fenny's flimsy behaviour in the face of tragedy had disappointed, had almost shocked her, consistent as it was with Fenny's confessions in the churchyard. Unconsciously she had looked for a high nobility from the girl, and was grievously taken aback to find it missing. She knew nothing, of course, of Fenny's grim outburst, although, on the day following, Fenny was "not so well," and from then to the end of the week one or other of the girls took her place ; but it seemed to her sometimes that where Fenny had been quiet, she now was furtive ; that there was something unhealthy in the occasionally fixed stare of her over-large eyes. She was sorry for Fenny, and felt she needed help, but the mystic connection which she had fancied between them was undoubtedly broken, and Lovekin, by contrast, crept gradually back into her favour.

Lovekin was, indeed, assiduous in those days ; she had at last accepted her warning that her fate hung in the balance, and, the last thing that she desired being to relinquish her exceedingly comfortable and well-paid post with Miss Blandford, she was doing all in her power to eradicate past bad impressions.

And by and by the tangled shreds of gossip and conjecture that blew about the village were shaped

into a torch that set fire under Aumbury thatches from the church to the Brown Bull. Eventually the red glare caught the eye of the Rector; having paused to take counsel with his wife—"Are you positively certain" (he always said "certayne"), "my dear, that this is not simply a village canard, to which Ursula's refusal to discuss her own business has given rise?"—he arrived at the cottage.

"It is my duty, my dear Ursulah, as your friend and Rector," he began, seated in an authoritative position by the kitchen table, "to inquire whether you have given serious consideration to the very grave step which, I am given to understand, you are pondering."

Ursula sighed. It was what Miss Blandford had said—less unpleasantly. As if she had not considered everything! Considered that she herself must become a pariah if she did the thing she knew now was the only thing to be done.

"Well, yes, sir, I've thought it well over," she answered cautiously.

"The rôle of the Good Samaritan is indeed an estimable one," intoned the Rector. "It will not be the first time, Ursulah, that you have adopted it. In so small a community as ours, one's good deeds are noised abroad."

"I've never wanted folks to talk about me," she answered him shortly.

"Ah! But you must surely see that if you persist in your présent determination you will expose yourself to—ah—very unfavourable discussion. Very unfavourable discussion indeed."

Ursula smiled. She was not without the shrewdness of the countryside.

"I only meant I didn't want folks to praise me for things I've done maybe without thinking. Blame's a different matter. Hard words never harm a body, so long as she knows she's in the right. You've told us that yourself, sir, from the pulpit."

The Rector clicked his tongue against the roof of his mouth; for the first time he found Ursula provoking.

"Quite so, quite so. The question is, how far are our perceptions of right and wrong influenced by our personal inclinations?"

Ursula blinked at him.

"I mean," elucidated the Rector, "that your devotion to your husband, which is in itself a very admirable thing, may lead you into grave neglect of other duties!"

"You don't think I want to do it, do you, sir?" she asked him, looking straight into the Rector's narrow, bigoted eyes.

He returned the look sternly, straightening his spine to its full height. He was, as we have seen, a man of limited perceptions. He was extremely sorry for Ursula, but, in common with his parishioners, he resented the fact that she had shown no womanly weakness, had not come to him for help or advice. He disapproved her relations with Miss Blandford, a woman of good breeding but obviously lacking in all religious principle, since she had never crossed the threshold of the church save on a sightseeing occasion, when he had surprised her—it being a

windy day—lighting a cigarette in the porch, and she had checked his protest by thrusting a ten shilling note, which she had forgotten to put in the offertory, into his hand. He suspected Miss Blandford of supporting Ursula's resolution, if she was not actually responsible for it : it was exactly the kind of thing one would expect of these free-thinking individuals who had no true Christian perception to leaven their literal interpretation of the Scriptures.

"I am asking you," he said coldly, "whether you have considered your duty to your daughters in bringing a sinner under your roof?"

"Yes, I've thought that over too. It's not as if they were children, any of them. Prue's going away soon to a place near Reading, and Mildred will go back to her husband, and I suppose Annie will soon find another place. It's really only Fenny ; I've not quite settled about her yet, sir."

"You do not feel that, in bringing this woman to live with you, you are virtually shutting the door upon your own daughters?"

"No, I don't feel that, sir. They can always come home whenever they like."

"You would allow them to expose themselves to a contaminating influence, with no thought for the danger of their own souls?" inquired the Rector, in an awful voice. Ursula's right hand clenched itself unseen, beneath her apron.

"I don't look at it that way, sir. The girls have had a good upbringing ; they know what's right and wrong. And knowing what they do about what all this has meant to us——" Her lips began to quiver,

and she pressed them together for a second, before concluding, "Their home's always open to them as long as I'm alive."

"And suppose they do not choose to regard it so?"

"I'll be sorry for that; but I suppose I'll have to try and make them see that their father's wishes must come first."

"Do you mean that Devoke has actually had the effrontery to do this thing? To suggest——?"

"Nothing of the kind, sir," she answered him sharply. "I've thought the whole thing out for myself. You see, the poor creature—Tamar's her name; I don't know if she's got any other—has nowhere to go; she's just a strolling body from a fair. If we was rich people, maybe I'd divorce Jim, if he wanted me to, so he could look after her the way he ought. But divorce isn't for folk like us."

"I should think not, indeed! Are you aware, Ursulah, that divorce is a mortal sin?"

"I hadn't thought about it that way, sir. Folks are bound to make mistakes, while human nature's what it is; and, if they're truly sorry, it seems a pity they shouldn't be given the chance to start over again. And there's another thing. If Jim was a rich man, and if he didn't much care about being divorced, perhaps he could buy her a house of her own, and pay a nurse and a doctor to look after her. You see, he owes it her, in a way. Not only for what he's done to her, but because he loves her, and——"

"Have you *no* moral sense?" The Rector was dumbfounded. Never since he had accepted the

living of Aumbury had one of his parishioners talked to him in this strain. His horror broke out in the five bitter words.

"I think so, sir ; but morals don't seem to have much to do with whether you love a person or not, to my way of thinking."

"Do you mean to tell me that you have knelt in my church Sunday after Sunday : that you have sung the response to the seventh commandment—'Lord, have mercy upon us, and incline our hearts to keep this law'—and still see no connection between morals and what you call *love* ?" persisted the Rector.

"Our Lord understood it wasn't always easy to keep the commandments," replied Ursula awkwardly, for she was not used to talking about religion.

"Really ! Please don't quote me that old story about the woman with the box of ointment !" said the Rector petulantly. "It has been used to excuse immorality so often that I am sick of the sound of it."

"I hadn't just remembered it then, sir," confessed Ursula. "I'm afraid that end of the matter isn't just so important to me now. The way I see it, Jim's got to make up to her somehow for what he's done to her. It's no light thing for a woman to have her face spoiled, even if she wasn't what you'd call a beauty to begin with. I don't know if Tamar was beautiful or not ; she's tall as a hop-pole, and her hair's dark with a sort of—a sort of firelight in it. That's all she's got left, thanks to Jim : her height

and her hair. He's got to pay her back somehow. I don't like to feel he's in debt to her, and she thinking hard things of him ; so I'm going to try to settle a bit of Jim's debt before he comes back."

The Rector was nonplussed. He considered that he had his parish pretty well in hand ; the young folks, of course, were like all young folks of to-day, bent on going their own course and restive beneath parental or rectoral coercion ; but the elder parishioners were a biddable enough lot, meek with their ays and nays, outwardly, at any rate, deferring to his advice and exhortation, although probably doing very much as they liked behind his back. Like all clergy of the present day, he had learnt the expediency of turning a blind eye, and he was, perhaps, more sensitive than the majority to verbal acquiescence. Ursula, in setting her will openly against his, had deeply offended him in the tender region of his vanity ; he turned cattish, and used a tone on her which he generally kept for his own household : in public he was proud of the mellifluity of his voice, but he did not trouble to be mellifluous as he said to Ursula :

"And what about your own responsibility in bringing into a community like ours a person of notoriously bad character ? It doesn't seem to have occurred to you that such a creature carries corruption with her wherever she goes."

"She won't have much chance to corrupt folks," answered Ursula, drily for her. "It's not as if the poor thing could get about. She'll be as safe in this cottage as a tiger in its cage at the Zoo !"

The Rector glared.

"Do not be so foolish, Ursulah ! Her very presence is bound, in the nature of things, to put—ah—ideas into the heads of—ah—inn-o-cent boys and girls."

"I don't think boys and girls are so innocent as we think—not that way—nowadays," said Ursula, with disconcerting sagacity. She paused to think of her own Mildred and Annie, reading *Married Without a Ring* ten or eleven years ago. "They'll all have read about it in the papers——"

"Reading about it in the papers is a totally different matter from having a peculiarly disgusting scandal thrust under their very noses !" cried the Rector.

"I suppose it depends on how you look at it, sir."

"I wish you to understand that I most heartily disapprove of your action, Ursulah !"

"Yes. I understand. I'm sorry, sir. There's one thing I didn't tell you——" She paused, twisting the corner of her apron in her fingers.

"Well ? It can hardly be worse than what you have already told me," he added meanly.

"It's only this. She's maybe going to have a baby."

"You mean that you are going to allow your husband's illegitimate child to be born under your own roof ?" he cried, aghast.

"It won't be the first illegitimate child that's been born in Aumbury," answered Ursula : thereby reducing him to silence. But the next moment,

being Ursula, she regretted her words, for at the time she had spoken she had entirely forgotten an unfortunate affair in the Rector's own household, when the prettiest of the Rectory parlourmaids had proved that the lure of the flesh is stronger than the influence of a sacrosanct environment.

"You are an obstinate and wrong-headed woman. I am not certain if you should not be called a wicked woman," was the Rector's parting shot, as he slammed the half-door behind him.

Mildred and Annie, who had been making the beds, appeared at the foot of the stairs, at the same moment that Prue edged open the apple-room door. Her small, flat face peered out, infinitely malicious and intelligent, at Ursula.

"Whatever's the row, ma?"

Ursula stood for a moment silently facing her daughters. Prue was the first to break the silence.

"That settles it; I shall go to Reading," she announced, with a toss of her head.

"What's up, Prue? What's the Rector been saying, mother?"

"I'm going to bring Tamar here," said Ursula slowly.

Mildred's jaw dropped; Annie's face burned crimson to the roots of her hair, then whitened slowly.

"You're *not*, ma! You don't mean it! You'd never do such a thing?"

"Why not?" countered Ursula. Her face, which had aged so much during the past week, hardened. "She's got nowhere else to go. And your father'd wish it."

"I shouldn't have said he was the one to be considered," cried Mildred, in a high, shrill voice.

"Oh, shouldn't you?" Ursula turned on her. "Then you can remember that as long as I'm alive, my girl, your father's going to be considered before the rest of you."

"That's a nice thing for a mother to say," mumbled Mildred.

"Oh, do as you like," put in Prue. "I'll go to Reading till my place is ready for me."

"Ma, do you mean you're going to turn us all out of our home like that?" wailed Annie.

"What do you mean? I'm not turning you out."

"Oh, have a heart, ma! You can't expect us to stay here and hobnob with——"

"Hold your tongue!"

"And what about me?" cried Mildred.

"Where'm I to go?"

"Back where you should be now," answered Ursula uncompromisingly. "Back to your duty, my girl."

"Don't be soft; you've got a husband, haven't you?" gulped Annie.

"No, I haven't!" she cried. "I didn't mean to tell you—you're all so mean, picking on me behind my back, and thinking yourselves so grand because you've got nothing to do with your wages but buy clothes and go to the pictures. You haven't got married, anyhow, and now you can thank your lucky stars you haven't! Jack's left me, mother; I knew that was what he meant when I got his postcard; and now I've heard from him he's

going to New Zealand and not coming back again. So I'm the worst off of the lot of you ! " She threw herself into a chair and broke into noisy weeping. Ursula stood looking down at her daughter, and came the nearest in her life to being cruel.

" A man doesn't feel his home's home unless there's bairns in it." She checked Mildred's expostulation with an uplifted hand. " He may say he doesn't want them, but when they come he knows he's better off than he was without them. And a woman's got naught to hold her man with unless there's a child."

" Did your having children hold dad ? " snivelled Mildred bitterly.

" Well, didn't it ? We've been wed twenty-five years, your father and me ; and he's never left me before."

" Are you going to have dad back, mother, when he comes out of gaol ? " asked Annie curiously.

" Are you crazy ? "

" And are you and *her* going to go on living here together after he comes back ? "

" That's to be seen. Maybe he wouldn't like it."

" Maybe not ! " said Annie ironically. She looked at Mildred. " Well, Mil, you and me'd better look out for a job together. I reckon you've not forgot how to wash a floor since you left home."

" Are you going, Annie ? " asked Ursula faintly.

" Oh, ma, I can't help it. I can't stay here. I'm fond of dad—I just couldn't put up with having her here in our home, where we've always been together—it's been so cosy——" The girl's voice broke.

"I'm sorry," whispered Ursula.

"I suppose it's the way you see it, ma," snuffled Annie, trying to be chivalrous, through her handkerchief.

Mildred broke out viciously :

"Well, all I can say is, it's a nice way for a mother to behave—choosing between her children and her husband's fancy woman ! "

"You'll take back those words !" Ursula's eye fixed her.

"Well—it's what you have done, after all, isn't it ? " floundered Mildred.

"You know the black lie you're telling. If I'm choosing at all, it's the choice I made long years ago, when you were all little children, and I'm making it again. You or your father : that's my choice. But I don't want to make it at all." Ursula appealed to them, for the first and only time. "Why do you make me do it ? Why won't you see it's still your home : that whoever came into it would make no difference, because you *are* my children——"

"Here's Fenny," said Prue, with satisfaction. "Now we'll hear what she's got to say about it ! "

"Say about what ? " asked Fenny. She had just come in from Miss Blandford's ; her prim, print frock, scarcely below her knees, made a schoolgirl of her ; but her face, like Ursula's, had altered. The slightly vacuous ethereality of her expression was replaced by a kind of slinking knowledge ; her eyes slid slyly from one to another of her sisters, avoiding Ursula.

"About Tamar coming to live with mother," Mildred threw at her.

Fenny blinked, casting her eyes down.

"Is that what she's going to do, mother?" she asked Ursula; her voice held a suppressed excitement.

"Yes."

"Oh . . . well . . ." hesitated Fenny. Ursula, her moment of weakness passed, assumed the initiative.

"And it won't make much difference to you," she said harshly, and forgetting that she always spoke gently to Fenny. "Because I've told Miss Blandford you can go to her and live in; she asked me about it the other day; I said I'd let her know for certain later on. You can go and tell her, if you like."

"And I hope you enjoy having dad's *friend* on your doorstep!" sneered Mildred.

Fenny mumbled something inaudible.

"Should I go back and tell Miss Blandford now, mother?"

"You can if you like," agreed Ursula, secretly taken aback by the unwonted coolness of Fenny. She had not had much time lately to observe her eldest daughter, but it now occurred to her that there certainly seemed something queer about the girl.

"I'm going to the butcher's," announced Ursula, picking up her basket. None of the girls offered to go for her. They could not share their mother's apparent indifference to village gossip; whatever their private differences, they united in hating and

resenting the villagers for the way they nudged each other and winked as they went by. Annie and Mildred never went out without each other, even after nightfall. They sat looking at one another, the same thought in their hearts : that they were sick of secrecy, and being stared at, and talked about. It was, in the long run, worse than losing their home.

" Maybe we'll be better off, out of the place till it's all blown over," suggested Annie, slightly shame-faced. " What do you say, Mildred ? I think I'll get my money out of the savings bank and make over to Maidenhead ; they say there's plenty of work to be had there."

" And if any of you happen to write to me," said Prue, suddenly, " you needn't address the envelope to Prue Devoke ; I'm going to be called Prue Smith."

" That's a wonderful name ! " scoffed Annie.

" It's a better name than Devoke, anyhow," retorted Prue. " Just you go and find out how many people will want to employ you as soon as they find out you're connected with the vitriol case ! "

Annie's face fell ; she stared at Mildred aghast.

" I say, Mil ! Had you ever thought of that ? "

" Of course I had, you ninny ! We'd better follow Prue's example and all call ourselves Smith, if we want to get jobs. I'd rather have found a nicer name," admitted Mildred, " but it's sure to lead to a mess if we all call ourselves by different names."

Annie howled suddenly, with her head in her arms.

" Oh, for goodness' sake what's the matter with you now ? "

"I don't know—it's worse to lose one's name than anything! It makes you feel like an orphan, or a baby that's been brought up in a foundling hospital!"

"Don't be such a fool. Well, that's another thing we've got dad to thank for—and mother too!" said Mildred viciously. "I knew she hated me, but I didn't think she hated the lot of us."

"Shut up. She doesn't. It's only she cares for dad more than any of us. What are you grumbling about? Haven't we always known it, ever since we were little things?"

"It's a pity we hadn't been boys," said Prue unexpectedly. "She'd have cared more for us then."

Annie dried her eyes, blew her nose, and combed back her hair.

"Well, Mil, are you going to come with me?"

"What's the good of asking that? I've not got a farthing, and we're owing money all over Archover. If I sell the sticks, there won't be more than a shilling or two left over."

"I'll pay for you," said Annie instantly. "You can pay me back out of your wages."

"Fancy going back to service, after being married!"

"You've never been out of service," was Annie's wise rejoinder. "If looking after a house and a man isn't the worst sort of service, and no time off, I'd like to know what is. I'll have to let Phil Longton know where I'm going," she added inconsequently.

"When's *she* coming?"

"I don't know—ask Prue. She was eavesdropping

in the apple-room all the time—weren't you, Prue?"

"I don't know; but I did hear Rector call mother a wicked woman," said Prue smugly. Annie fired up.

"That's a damned lie!"

"It isn't; and I'll thank you not to swear at me."

"I'll swear if I want to, without asking you, you little stuck-up sneak. Come on, Mildred, I said I'd get the suet chopped before mother came back; you'll have to lend a hand," said Annie, jumping up.

Fenny had gone back to Green Gates; she stood outside the door of the parlour, her lower lip caught in her teeth, before she tapped cautiously.

"Come in!" Miss Blandford's tone was not inviting. She had just settled down to the detested job of doing the accounts, in which, following her new policy, Lovekin was at hand to help. Lovekin was a little less uneasy, for, although Miss Blandford continued to be polite and noncommittal, she failed entirely to conceal her secret satisfaction in Lovekin's return to the fold. Lovekin, brought finally to her senses by a severe cold, caught in leaping nudely about the meadows in performance of the Slades' newly invented—or, as they phrased it, reconstructed—Pan-Hellenic health régime, meekly accepted the coals of fire in the form of hot whiskey and lemon with which Miss Blandford sternly plied her, and bent to her task, only pausing to throw a glance of veiled triumph at Fenny.

"What do you want, Fenny? Unless it's important, it had better wait until I've finished my accounts."

"Please, madam, it's just to say that I can come and live in whenever you care to have me."

Miss Blandford laid down her pen. It was strange how her relations with Fenny had dropped suddenly into the ordinary relations between employer and servant.

"Is that your mother's message?"

"Yes, madam. You see, she'll be wanting the cottage to herself soon."

Miss Blandford understood from this oblique way of stating the case that Ursula had come to the decision on which, at their last meeting, she had still been pondering.

"Very well, Fenny," she said presently. "You'd better move in—and we can see how things go on."

Fenny looked—and felt—crestfallen; she had expected her announcement to be received with enthusiasm, and Miss Blandford was treating it as a very unimportant matter indeed. She shot a glance beneath her eyelids at Lovekin, in whom she sensed an enemy. She wondered if Miss Sherlock had noticed something after all—— Her thoughts were interrupted by Miss Blandford's inquiring sharply:

"You don't feel it's your duty to stay at home and help your mother?"

"Oh, no, madam. There's not much to do at home—not nearly as much as there is here!" Fenny hastened to assure her.

"There'll be more, won't there, with a sick woman in the house?"

Fenny cast down her eyelashes, looked wounded and helpless.

"I don't think mother'd like me to be at home, as things are," she murmured demurely.

"Very well. You had better see about bringing your things."

"Thank you, madam," said Fenny, in a small voice. She closed the door gently after her.

Miss Blandford found Lovekin staring at her with a very odd expression on her face.

"What's the matter?"

"You look as if you don't care if Fenny comes or not!"

"I don't," admitted Miss Blandford. "As a matter of fact, I'd just as soon she didn't." Her pencil stabbed the blotting-paper into little black dints. "I'm having her on Ursula's account, not on her own. Ursula's a—a great woman. I respect her more than anyone I have ever met in my life. If she's wrong, she's at least got the courage to go wrong grandly." Unconsciously she cocked an eye on Lovekin in a way that appeared to suggest that Lovekin's scale of wrongdoing was not, in her opinion, according to the grand manner. Slightly goaded, Lovekin could not forbear a return prick.

"I thought you were so keen on having Fenny."

Miss Blandford threw herself back in her chair. An impulse was on her to clear her soul of a variety of things.

"I was," she confessed. "I don't mind owning

—now—that I nearly made a fool of myself about Fenny.”

“She’s certainly different from the ordinary village girl,” conceded Lovekin, with a generosity she hoped was not lost upon its recipient.

“I’m not so sure——” murmured Miss Blandford, with an eye fixed this time on space. “She’s certainly not an Ursula in the making. It was partly your fault,” she accused suddenly. “You know I can’t stand being left alone. And you insisted on making such a damned fool of yourself with those beastly Slades ; and look at what you’ve got for it ! Do pull that woollen thing closer over your chest ; you know you’ve got a delicate chest, Love——”

They both started, looking at one another guiltily : for it was a long time since that name had passed between them. A smile broke at the corner of Lovekin’s mouth, and was hastily smoothed away, for she felt she must not too quickly betray her relief at the sign of forgiveness.

“Well, I was annoyed too—to see you hanging about after Fenny ; it seemed so *beneath* you, somehow”—almost she persuaded herself that this was the reason of her desertion.

For no apparent reason, Miss Blandford began to laugh.

“We are a couple of old fools, Lovekin !—I beg your pardon ; I’d forgotten you’re fifteen years younger than I.”

“I always forget it,” said Lovekin handsomely.

“Anyhow, I’m old enough to know better. I suppose the psycho-analysts would say I’m at a

dangerous age ! You'll have to look after me in future." Her right hand shot out and gripped Lovekin's. " Friends again, Lovekin ? "

" Of course, my precious ! " gushed Lovekin.

" I'll tell you what it is," said Miss Blandford confidentially. " Coming to Aumbury has upset us both ; given us mental indigestion. If my old physique hadn't given out before yours, I might even have caught my death of cold capering in the dew with those lunatics ; *anno Domini* saved me that, for which I suppose I must be thankful, but nearly landed me in a far more parlous situation. Of course, we'll have to stick here now and see Ursula through ; she's going to have a diabolical time, with these self-righteous villagers (I wish I could root out some of their scandals and scare them into quietness about Ursula !) and that half-witted parson to plague her."

" Oh, yes," breathed Lovekin, rather relieved to hear that the new life was not to come immediately to an end. Apart from nudism, the Slades still fascinated her schoolgirlish heart.

" I loathe being mistaken in people," pouted Miss Blandford. " And I was badly mistaken in Fenny. There—I've admitted it."

" I always thought her refinement was a little bit put on—skin deep, you know," said Lovekin jealously, as though aware that one had not far to probe in the case of her own.

" Oh, I don't know about her refinement. She certainly handles things nicely, and she's scrupulously clean. But I hated the way she let Ursula down."

If she thinks she's going to come here and never go near her mother, she's very much mistaken. I shall send her in for an hour every morning, whether she likes it or not."

Lovekin grinned.

"I never imagined your being so robust over Fenny!"

"I feel robust! That's what Ursula's done for me. I was just running to pulp, and her example pulled me together. My life seemed so trivial compared with hers: my emotions so shallow—— Oh, come on, Lovekin, let's finish these accounts, and then we might walk to the foot of Brambledown and back before luncheon. I want some exercise, and it will do your cold good, if you wrap up well."

"I don't believe Fenny's as 'good' as we think she is," put in Lovekin, as she shuffled the sheets of paper in front of her.

"Fenny? What *do* you mean?"

"Well, I'm nearly sure it was she I caught the other night slinking into Three Oaks with that nasty boy of Benson's: you know the one—such a horrid look in his eye!"

"*Fenny*? Oh, you must be mistaken, Lovekin! I happen to know she's got quite a morbid horror of anything to do with boys," said Miss Blandford earnestly.

"Well, she may have had; but I should say she's got over it. I'm positive it was Fenny; she was wearing that pink check you got her in Todmarket—even in the dusk it showed up quite clearly."

Miss Blandford smiled a little wistfully.

STALLION

“ If that’s the case, it only proves we’ve just got an ordinary little servant and not an angel. We’ll have to look after her, on Ursula’s account.”

“ She must have been very deceitful all this time ! ”

“ I don’t know. She took her father’s affair very oddly—I believe, in spite of her callous behaviour, it shocked her more than any of the others. She may still be upset. I’ll have to keep an eye on Fenny—as her employer, Lovekin, as her employer ! Come on, let’s do the accounts.”

CHAPTER XV

SPRING flamed into summer, and summer passed with a mighty conflagration into autumn, until winter took austere possession of the countryside. It was a hard, bleak winter, of clammy fogs that crawled through the walls of houses and bedimmed the lamp- or candlelight in the evenings, or of howling winds that beat the smoke down the wide old chimneys and set sparks and even cinders blowing about the rooms ; a comfortless winter for the poor, though tolerable for people like the Halcutts, who, as a hunting family, dreaded nothing but frost. How Ursula had longed for the frost, for its clean, hearty crackle, and the way it made the sparks fly up the chimney from the dry logs, as she groped her way through the malevolent grey mist to chop the dank wood, or went a dozen times round the kitchen in an evening, trying to detect the chink through which the draught came that made Tamar hunch her shoulder and complain fretfully that there was no comfort to be found anywhere in this riddled honeycomb of a house ! She might have spent all her days on velvet carpets between curtains of tapestry, thought Ursula—this waif of the high-road, who had never, before entering the cottage, laid her bones to rest upon a featherbed.

And she had lain there for many weeks, still as a

log, while Ursula dragged her weary limbs to dubious rest on the straw pallet the girls had shared : still as a log, with no sign of life in her save for the eyes that glinted in candlelight like coal splinters through the folds of the bandages, and for the voice that came creakingly in a wordless animal noise, through the slit through which they thrust the tube to feed her, a task at first performed by the district nurse, but which Ursula learnt soon to perform with an equal dexterity.

If it could have spoken, that log-figure !—could have broken the silence which had fallen upon the cottage at the girls' departure, with "What are you doing?" or, "Why don't you come to me?" But the acid had just caught the corner of the lips, so it moved them as little as possible, not to drag the wound. Yet something warned her that while it preserved its masked nothingness things would be easier for her ; she would not have to accept it all at once as a living, thinking woman, fancying on its mouth Jim's kisses, and its body bent to his will. It could be nothing but a doll to her, and she would not need to trouble herself with establishing contacts ; she would not have immediately to set about the intolerable task of building up that parody of friendship that must hold two women living under one roof together. She would not be embarrassed by its gratitude, or exasperated because it showed none. When these things came later, she would have had ample time to prepare herself. She told herself that it was not possible to care for a thing day and night, performing every imaginable menial and

revolting service for it, without coming to feel something—some tenderness, because it was helpless and could do nothing without one's help.

Thus she had resigned herself to her long servitude, to the thousand and one additional tasks which the coming of Tamar had brought upon her.

The two women sat on opposite sides of the hearth, Ursula with knitting in her hands, and Tamar disdainfully putting an occasional stitch into a bit of red material, then flinging this aside with a gusty sigh, to snatch up an old newspaper from the pile that she insisted on keeping beside her chair. The red material had no shape and was meant for nothing ; it was merely that she would have gone mad without any sort of occupation. And the papers contained the accounts of Jim's trial, which she would pore over and spell out again and again, until she could almost recite them from memory. And sometimes she would quote a piece aloud, and smile fearfully at Ursula. If one could recognise it as a smile.

They had at last removed the bandages, to discover ruin. Of the left side of the face and head nothing remained that could conceivably be called human. The scar dragged itself down her neck and was mercifully lost in the collar of her gown. When she had first gone out she wore, with bitter effrontery, a mask of black sateen ; the district nurse had insisted that it was necessary to protect the scar, but Tamar was not deluded as to the truth : that decency forbade the infliction of such a spectacle upon human

eyesight. Since the cold weather had come she hardly went out at all ; her body had lost its hardiness, and she was heavy with the weight of the unborn child. All the bitterness of her resentment centred itself in this thing which, because in her helplessness she had been unable to prevent it, was to come to her. She hated it, too, because it might be a son, and, as such, it would bring him pleasure and triumph over her in the end. She hated it because she felt, with the heightened sensitiveness of her condition, Ursula's love reaching out to it, taking it, possessing it before it was born.

She sat ironically watching the small, gnarled hands of Ursula, flicking the wool round the needles, looping it, passing swiftly from row to row. Nor was Ursula the only one who busied herself knitting clothes for Tamar's baby ; up at Green Gates, Miss Blandford, with many grunts and expletives, was driving wooden needles through curdled masses of wool—"For mercy's sake, Lovekin, come and get me out of this mess !" She had hardly ever knitted before in her life, but to her the unborn child was Ursula's, and it was for Ursula that she spent her evenings in getting hot and bothered, and Lovekin her mornings in pulling out the tortured results of the previous night's work.

"It's a pity this child isn't in you instead of in me !" sneered Tamar.

"Ay, it's a pity it isn't." Ursula's eyes met the malicious slits across the hearth.

"Ay, you've done your best to make it yours, haven't you ?"

"What do you mean?" asked Ursula, startled

"Many's the time I could hit you for the way your eyes stroke me here," returned Tamar, laying her hand over the child. "Why can't you wait till the thing's born?"

"Maybe a child wants loving before it's born as well as after, if it's to grow up bonny, instead of poor and puling, with naught to do but live and die."

"God, I wish the pair of us was dead," muttered Tamar. She hunched her shoulders together and flung an angry look across the back of the chair. "Might as well live in a sheep-pen as this house!"

Ursula got up quietly and pulled the clothes-horse, on which she had hung a folded blanket, more closely round Tamar's chair. The wind gave a shriek as mocking as Tamar's laughter and filled the room with smoke and smuts. Ursula looked at it despairingly. Then she sat down.

"I've done it four times to-night; I'll let it lie till morning."

Tamar cackled and beat her hands together as if this pleased her.

"That's it, that's it! You be a slut like me—that's the sort men like! Not your toiling and moiling kind, that'll spend the strength on a floor they'd better save for a man. Who minds a bit of dirt? Let them clean it up themselves, if they're so particular!"

"I don't care about the house; but I don't want the soot to get on my wool."

"My brat won't care if the wool's black or white!"

STALLION

You see—he'll turn natural to the black as his mammy did before him."

"Ay, but it'll be my joy to make a clean lad of him." Both women referred to the child by the masculine pronoun, as though no alternative offered itself.

"Ay? And suppose I didn't let you have him, to spoil and pamper and bring up like a milksop? Suppose I took him away with me one dark night, and the pair of us went back to our own life on the road?"

"You forget," said Ursula, looking directly at her. "You've give me your word the child's mine from the day he's born."

Tamar began to hum, and to sway her body from side to side. For the first time the fear shot through Ursula that she might not keep her word, that she might choose, for some devilish reason of her own, to vanish in the night, taking the child, to punish Jim. Secretly, desperately, she set her own good to vanquish the evil that was Tamar, the evil that had ruined them all.

"What's the good of children? What have you got out of your own, that you're so keen after another woman's? Where are they now? All cleared out, haven't they?—all save that one with the sidelong eyes that leads fellows up the lane by the smithy."

"No. Fenny doesn't do that," said Ursula decidedly.

"Oh, she doesn't, doesn't she? Better ask her; better find out from her own lips if you'll be a grandmother before the leaves are out again!"

"You're lying," said Ursula calmly.

"All right ; I'm lying. Try getting the truth from her—maybe you'll find it's sourer than mine."

Ursula forced her fingers to go on with the knitting ; she did not believe a word that Tamar said about Fenny, but her heart trembled to think that such things should be said.

"Wonder how Jim's enjoying himself !"

The only pleasure Tamar could invent for herself during the interminable evenings was in thus tormenting Ursula ; and even that amusement was beginning to pall, because Ursula no longer responded, as she did formerly, with burning cheeks and trembling voice. She, like Jim, had learnt to mistrust Tamar's statements, yet, like Jim, had failed to make herself totally immune to their cruelty.

"Poor old Jim ! They found him a true bill !" Tamar was chanting. "Eighteen months hard ! Hard—hard—hard labour ! If I'd been the judge he'd have got five—ten—years ! Life ! 'Tis a burning shame they let him off so light, and me with this to carry—blast him ! But he's got hard labour ! Hard, hard labour. That's worse than penal, you know. Only it's not—so—long——"

"Maybe he's thinking of us now."

"Not him ! Shall I tell you what he's thinking about, if his back and his loins and the muscles of his arms'll let him think at all ? Hard labour gets them, I can tell you ! I once loved a chap that had just done time for robbery, with violence—he told me all about it. I'll tell you what Jim's thinking

about, if he's thinking at all. He's biting his nails and wishing like hell for a girl, younger and stronger than either of us, to tumble !”

“When you talk that way you comfort me ; because I know you never knew Jim at all.”

“Didn't I ? Oh, I didn't, didn't I ! I'll show you if I knew Jim——” She gave Ursula some lewd details in confirmation of her claim. “Now, didn't I, didn't I ?”

“Nay. That isn't knowing Jim,” said Ursula sturdily. “That's just how lots of lasses knew him. That's not *Jim*.”

Her confidence drew Tamar's curiosity.

“Well, go on and tell me how you knew him. Did he—— ?”

“Nay, I don't know aught about that ; that's not what Jim means to my way of thinking. Jim—— Nay,” she sighed away her inarticulacy with an apologetic smile. “I never was one for talking about me and Jim.”

“You've been a fool, haven't you ?” sneered Tamar.

“Maybe. Why do you hate me the way you do ?” Ursula laid down her knitting. “I've done all I could for you. I've housed and clothed and fed you. I've risen at daybreak and I've sat by you till the clock struck two. I've never spoke an unkindly word to you for all you've said to me. I've been a deal more patient with you than I've been with my own daughters, because you're a young thing, and, though you've wronged me cruel, I can't but be sorry for the awful price you've paid for it. I've

refused nothing you've begged of me, for love of Jim—of my husband. Loving a person makes you act loving to the ones they love, even if they've wronged you. But what made him love you I can't think, for you're a hard, bitter, cruel creature, born to be the bane of a man, though you're not strong enough to be the devil Jim thought you were. And you've given me nothing but salt bitterness since the day you came."

She might truly have added that, because of Tamar, she had lost her friends ; that the allowance promised from Brambledown to see her through her trouble, in consideration of Jim's years of service there, was promptly stopped when the news of Tamar's presence drifted up the hill ; that she was dependent upon the girls for her means—Prue, actuated by an apparent softening of heart, increasing her weekly contribution to half a crown (" But I won't have a farthing spent on you-know-who ! ") ; Annie, in service as a waitress in a Maidenhead café, contributing with erratic generosity from her wages (" Tips have been grand this week, so I can manage a whole ten shillings ") ; Mildred seemed to have difficulty in keeping herself, but was full of promises of " a bit later on " : and, without consulting Fenny, Miss Blandford paid one half of her wages direct to Ursula—and was generous in other ways as well, so far as Ursula's pride would permit.

But, when it was no longer possible to go out and earn a bit extra with a day's charring or washing, it was not always easy to make ends meet, with Tamar's

appetite finicky as a fine lady's, and log fires in the apple-room every night. It made a big difference having to buy the wood they once had got from Brambledown.

"Why shouldn't you do those things for me?" was Tamar's insolent rejoinder. "And why should I pay you for them, with 'Thank you, kind ladys,' like a beggar in the gutter. Why should I, I say? Why shouldn't I share the things he gave you, because you happened to wear his ring on your finger, while mine went bare? Hadn't I a right to as much as you?"

"Did you work for him as I did? Did you rub your hands sore washing his clothes, and burn your fingers cooking his food?"

"You fool!" said Tamar, again. "Is that all a man wants from his wife?"

"No. And it's not all Jim got from me."

"Anyhow, he got tired of you," jeered Tamar. "I wasn't the first woman he had after you, by a long way!"

"That's my business!" snapped Ursula. "I'll thank you not to speak of it." Then she laid the back of her hand to her lips, biting her knuckles. "You'll have to excuse me. There are times you make me forget the state you're in, and that I should be pitying you, not girding at you," she said confusedly. "After all, you loved him——"

Tamar stared, then broke into a harsh laugh, her scarred mouth twisting frightfully.

"Love him? Nay, I'd want something better than a pot-bellied narrow-chested runt like Jim when I

went loving," she retorted, with a bitter brutality that masked her use of the past tense. "Letting me trample on him one minute, and next minute mad as a hornet because he felt me despising him ! I made him wash my feet for me one night," she murmured, with satisfaction in the memory.

"You never treated him right !" cried Ursula, resentful.

"Eh ? What's the right way to treat a chap born with a woman's foot on his neck ? The miserable —— ! I might have known he'd play a trick like this on me——" Her hand went up to the remains of the left side of her face. "He wasn't man enough to master me, I might have known he'd not be man enough to kill me decent when he'd done with me !"

"Jim wouldn't hurt a wasp that didn't sting him. You stung him till his wits were gone. What did you want to go with him for, if you didn't want him ?"

"I'd have gone with the devil himself that morning," answered Tamar, with sudden weariness. "I'd nothing in my stomach—not a bite nor a sup, do you understand ?—and the soles of my feet were on the stones. He acted the way he'd got money. How was I to know it was just a bit of his bragging ? Ay, he'd got money for a bit of green ribbon, a pair of red shoes, and some odds and ends any farm lad would buy you, if you looked cunning at him. He bought me food, but he made me sleep on the straw with him at night ; and always he was trying to make me thank him—the way you do—and cock him up with his own importance, as if, damn him ! he'd bought my soul and body with a string of blue beads ! And

I'd have all I could do not to laugh at him—he looked so little and mean, and like a drawing in the papers, of Pop or Old Bill or something—just when he was swaggering like mad, and thinking how grand he was : acting the lord in front of me with a string of blue beads and a sixpenny hair-comb, and expecting me to fall down and worship his feet ! ”

“ Nay, that's not Jim's notion,” Ursula was beginning ; and checked herself. For why should she betray Jim to this cruel devil ? Why should she explain that all the braggartry and bombast which endeared him to her was the mark, not of Jim's arrogance, but of his humility ?—that when he stuck out his chest and strutted he was only trying to persuade himself against his own intelligence that he was as fine a chap as the next man ?—and that it had been her joy all the years of her marriage to set the foundation of her sure love under that fragile and windy superstructure ?

The two fell silent, both a little exhausted by their familiar struggle. Not one night, but all nights, Tamar drove her over this same battleground : she who would have been so well content to sit peacefully, trying to interest Tamar in village gossip, in plans for the coming child, in a dozen harmless subjects which did not include Jim, since upon that subject they could not but come to bitterness.

“ And now, God blast him, I've got his child inside me. He's beat me at the finish.” She sat there, with the frightful side of her head towards Ursula, her hands clawing themselves like the talons of harpies on the arms of the chair.

Presently Ursula got up to prepare the supper : a bit of fish, steamed under a basin over the fire, for Tamar, the remainder of the breakfast porridge, pressed into a little pudding in a cup, with a few spoonfuls of milk, for herself. There was, to finish up with, a glass of wine for both of them, from the bottle of port that Miss Blandford had sent in, and made Ursula swear she would share equally with Tamar. She did so—only not quite equally ; Tamar's glass usually brimmed, while hers held not much more than a finger's depth of the wine. But she said, and believed, that it did her good ; that it helped her to sleep, and, sometimes, soothed her after the long, nerve-jagging evening alone with Tamar, that no neighbour save Miss Blandford herself, with, occasionally, Lovekin, came in to relieve. Lovekin did not often come, because, quite sincerely, she could not look at Tamar's face without sickening, and she did not like to ask Ursula to tell her to put her mask on in the house. But Miss Blandford came many an evening, steeling herself with the knowledge that it helped Ursula to have her there : relieved the long horror of the dark, deserted days, and brought wholesomeness into an atmosphere which, for all Ursula's courage and steadfast determination, became diseased through Tamar's presence.

"The food's ready," said Ursula, with her back to Tamar. She was facing the whitewashed wall, flushed now with the firelight ; and she started as Tamar's shadow, long, narrow, and predatory, slowly rose upon it. It seemed to her for a single instant as though her home was haunted by an evil

ghost, as though its walls untellably ancient, had set loose some spectre connected, not with the present, but with the unknown past. She had always felt there might be ghosts in the cottage, but had been certain that they were benign ghosts, whose blessing lay upon her and all that belonged to her : and now she wondered, with a catch of the breath as the wind went whooping round the chimney stacks, whether some unknown awful deed had left unhouseled its restless victim to torment her. As the shadow lengthened and approached her she barely repressed a scream. Tamar's voice grated behind her :

"What's wrong with you? Are you bogey-driven?"

"It's naught ; I'm tired," said Ursula, wiping her brow with the back of her hand ; but that night she filled her own glass, as well as Tamar's, to the brim.

The soft, mellow wine (Miss Blandford knew her vintages) flowed warmly over her palate and melted into her body ; presently she felt warm, and even a little sleepy. She saw Tamar through a pleasant, rosy dimness, her shoulders hunched over the table, her fork rooting discontentedly among the food on her plate. Poor soul, with her face blasted and her body misshapen with the experience which was soon to come to her.

"It'll not be so long now, Tamar," she said gently.

The woman raised her head with that fox-like movement that Jim had noticed, and eyed her suspiciously.

"Long enough, so far as I'm concerned," she retorted.

"Tamar. You didn't mean what you said—about taking the baby away with you, did you?"

She ceased eating, and everything about her seemed to become crafty; the curve of her spine, the withdrawn thrust of her head, her hands that she clamped suddenly between her thighs. Her body began to sway softly from her hips, like a coiled adder.

"Why shouldn't I? It's mine."

"What could you do with it? The poor thing would likely starve," pleaded Ursula.

"Not it! A baby's a useful thing to go begging with. Folks that would refuse you a crust in the common way will put their hands in their pockets if you're carrying a child."

"'Twill be harder for you to get work, with a baby," Ursula reminded her.

"Work? Who'd give me work with this, d'you fancy?" She again touched the left side of her face.

"I'm not so much of a fool as to go looking for it. 'Twill be begging for me in the future, and a rare good job I'll make of it, in my black mask, with a baby in my arms. Ay, that's what I'll do; I'll beg my way back to the fair, and there, maybe, they'll make a penny peep-show of me. Ay, they'll be glad enough to have me there! There'll be many a one will pay a penny to see the girl that got vitriol thrown in her face, and I'll draw a fine audience to listen to me warning the lasses what may come to them if they play false with their sweethearts!"

"You promised the baby to me."

"Ay?" said Tamar ironically. "Well, maybe I'll unpromise it again."

"It'll do you no good to play false with me that's treated you kindly," said Ursula, in a low voice.

"Is that a curse you're putting on me?" was Tamar's careless rejoinder.

"Nay," said Ursula. "I don't curse folk." Leaning forward, she deliberately refilled Tamar's glass. Tamar raised it, laughing a little.

"What are you doing? Are you trying to make me drunk, so I'll say you can have the child after all? There's many a thing said in drink that's gainsaid when a body's sober."

"What do you want for the baby?"

"Ah-h-h! So that's it—in the end! A bargain! A baby going for a bargain. Well," said Tamar, smiling through the red heart of the wine into the firelight, "what'll you offer for a fine baby—that may be born dead, or squint-eyed, or a freak, for all you know?"

Ursula caught her breath. She had so little to offer that she was terrified, now, by her own suggestion. She looked round the kitchen, wondering if there was anything there that would fetch money. There was nothing, she thought, of much value; none of the things for which dealers in the antique periodically combed the village. Jim had not inherited much from his people, and her brothers had divided between them the possessions of her own home. To none of them could she look for help, for not one had written or come to her since her trouble;

she knew what that meant—that they disowned her.

There had been a little old clock that chimed a sweet tune, that she had parted with, much against her will, because the man who wanted it seemed as though he would never go out of the place without it ; and there had been a few odds and ends of pewter, that neither of them had cared about, and Jim had let go for much less than its real value, because he wanted money to pay for a new roof to the shed. Nothing remained but the furniture which the buyer of the clock had informed her was of no value—a statement that hurt her at the time, because she had been so proud of the dresser and the chairs that the village carpenter had made for them when they got married ; to her they were beautiful and their price was beyond rubies ; she could not believe that they were as worthless and ugly as she had been told they were.

Tamar saw her wandering glance, and began to mock her.

“ Who’ll buy an old rocking-chair with a patch-work cushion ? Who’ll buy a table—a fine, sound table ? You only have to stick a bit of paper under one leg and your crockery’s safe ! Who’ll buy a hearth-rug with a hole in one end ? Walk up, walk up, ladies and gentlemen ! Here’s valuable property going for a song ! ”

She suddenly remembered the two survivors of Betsy’s last litter ; she had parted with the rest, and had intended to rear these for bacon, and to take the place of old Betsy, whose days were numbered. To sell them at Christmas for porkers was to lose

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money ; even to sell one was to upset her calculations, for they were a sow and a promising young boar, upon whom she had counted for the continuation of her stock. Betsy was too old to farrow again ; her last litter was a poor one—none worth keeping or selling but these two. She was an ancient pig, and a family friend, but her days of usefulness were over.

Ursula considered for a moment ; then she timidly made an offer. Tamar concealed her surprise ; it was larger than she had expected, but with the rapaciousness of her kind, she shrugged it aside. Ursula trembled ; at the most the two piglets could not fetch more than two pounds ten apiece, and she must at all costs keep the sow. She nervously advanced a few shillings.

At the end of an hour, Ursula rose heavily, and went to a drawer in the dresser, from which she took a bottle of ink, a pen, and a pad of lined paper, belonging to Fenny. She found her glasses and put them on ; for a moment she could see nothing, the lines ran into a blur before her eyes. Her unaccustomed hand fumbled awkwardly for the pen, and dipped its crusted nib into the ink. Tamar watched her, fascinated as a cat with a ball of string, as she bent low over the table, slowly scrawling words that danced before her eyes. She finished ; took off her spectacles and rubbed them, then put them on again to read it through. Then, shading her face with one hand, she pushed the sheet of paper across the table to Tamar, who pushed it contemptuously aside.

"Nay, you don't suppose I'm a scholar, do you? A line or two of print I can read, when I've a mind to, but the twists and twines of handwriting's no good to me. How am I to know what you'll have written?"

"There's twelve words," said Ursula, patiently, and marked each with her index finger as she read them slowly aloud. "I have sold my baby to Ursula Devoke for three pounds ten."

"And what's that you've scratched out there?" asked Tamar suspiciously. Ursula flushed.

"At first I put 'my son,' " she confessed.

"Ay! You'll be nicely taken in if it's a girl after all!"

"Now you must sign it," said Ursula, offering the pen.

"Before I've got the money?" sneered Tamar.

"The money's at the bottom of the garden," said Ursula, pointing to the curtained windows. "You can go and look at it whenever it suits you. You've got no need of money while you're under my roof. But the pigs are the money and it's there under your eye, as safe as if it was in your pocket along of your handkerchief." Ursula put the pen into Tamar's hand; she fingered it dubiously.

"I can't write," she blurted out, with sudden defiance. Ursula was at first taken aback; her plan seemed to have failed. What trust could she lay on Tamar's word, without proof to back her claim? Memory came to her rescue; had she not gone with an old neighbour to the post office to draw her pension, and watched the old woman making her mark in the place provided for her signature?

"You must make a cross here," she pointed out.
 "And I'll write your name under it."

Tamar knitted her brows, dipped the pen in the ink, shook a spatter of black drops on Ursula's table-cloth, and savagely scored a cross on the paper below Ursula's writing. Ursula recovered the pen and sat down again.

"T-a-m-a-r," she wrote slowly. "What's your other name?"

"My other name?" asked Tamar suspiciously.

"Ay—your second name, that was your people's."

"Folks call me Tamar," she answered. "That's good enough, isn't it?" She added, as Ursula hesitated, vaguely uneasy lest the agreement should fail in validity for want of a second name, "They tacked on Snazelle when I was in the circus, if the other's not enough for you. Tamar Snazelle : that's a fine name for a circus girl, isn't it? But I never knew how to spell it," she owned.

Ursula made an attempt, but gave it up. There, at least, was Tamar's mark, and the name by which she was known. No other had appeared, even in the trial : "the woman called Tamar"—that was how the judge had spoken of her. If Tamar was good enough for a judge it must be good enough for other people.

She saw the door of the apple-room open, the light from its log fire play for a moment on the door-jamb ; and then it closed. Tamar had gone to bed.

She rose stiffly and began to rake the ashes out of the grate. An immediate chill took possession of the room. The clock struck a weary ten, near to running

down. The lamp, unheeded for the last hour, had blackened a side of the globe. She turned it low, ready to carry it upstairs, and, crossing the room, drew aside the curtain and laid her face close to the icy window-pane. The stormy sky, heaped with black clouds, behind which gleamed, uncertainly, the pale, frightened light of the moon. She wondered if Jim could see it in his cell.

Aumbury lights were out. The pastoral heart of England resumed its quiet throb in her ear. The old, old walls and roofs whispered their message of timeless security.

A picture shaped itself slowly in her mind.

Three oak-trees, standing together at the farther extremity of a wedge-shaped field ; their trunks stood deep in the sodden remnants of their autumn glory. The nests of rooks made black clots in the veinous tracery of their branches against the winter sky. Lightning had blazed a scar down the side of one ; the bole of another—so thick as hardly to be spanned by the stretch of three men—was twisted as though it had been the plaything of some titanic tempest ; and the third, which, standing between the two, would seem secure from the whimsies of the elements, sent out its branches, with the regularity of umbrella spokes, from the trunk. Of this one, she thought, as she had thought for many years, it's rarely you see an oak-tree so shapely. To this one, in expression of her life's creed, she applied the masculine pronoun, for to her it stood for the proud male element, the conquering one. The side, the blemished, the submissively bending trees, leaning

obediently outwards to afford "him" the utmost benefits of sun and air, symbolised as surely for her the relation of the female to the male.

That summer storm, to which she had listened, sleepless, on the night when she left Jim in the lock-up, had splintered another long strip from the already wounded tree ; a branch hung limply like a broken arm, the leaves had turned sour in early summer, had fallen early, leaving the havoc of the lightning exposed. The tree was doomed, was dying. But, gallant to the end, it still interposed its ruin between its master and the bitter north-east. Its twisted branches would make a grand place for a little boy to play in.

She saw him, that little boy, growing up in the shelter of the wise old walls, learning from them all the quiet and peaceful wisdom that they had taught her, of immutability and decay : swinging on the pear-tree boughs, playing perilous games round the hives, for which, for his own safety, he would have to take a thrashing ; tossing his ball against the tarred sides of the shed, stealing baths in the river—a little short boy, square like Jim with Jim's black brows and knowing eyes ; a village terror, the school bad boy, with a merry disregard of punishments ; kissing the girls before he was properly breeched—Jim's son, their joy and gladness, in whom they would forget all that was past, and learn, in time, a new loving friendliness for each other. Her arms shaped themselves unconsciously, as though they already held the child. A momentary pang of jealousy stabbed her, as it had done many times

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since Tamar's coming, to think that this child was not to be born of her body : and faded away in tenderness for Jim's son. For she was as certain as though she had had an angelic visitation that it would be a son : a son whom she would cradle on sunny summer days beneath the oak-trees, where she and the girls, when they were little ones, had had so many picnics ; where the birds would sing and the leaves rustle for the new baby, as they had done for Mildred and Annie, Fenny and Prue.

The three mighty oak-trees, two female and one male, who had borne her philosophy, and would bear it to the grave. . . .

THE END

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